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In a

Grass Country

By

MRS H. LOVETT CAMERON







IN A GRASS COUNTRY:

A Story of Love and Sport,

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

"DECEIVERS EVER," "JULIET'S GUARDIAN," "VERA NEVILL," "PURE
GOLD," "A NORTH-COUNTRY MAID," "A DEAD PAST,"
"THE LODGE BY THE SEA," ETC., ETC.

"Come, I'll show you a country that none can surpass,
For a flyer to cross like a bird on the wing.
We have acres of woodland and oceans of grass;
We have game in the autumn and cubs in the spring;
We have scores of good fellows hang out in the Shires."
"And life is short, and love is life,
And so the tale is told."

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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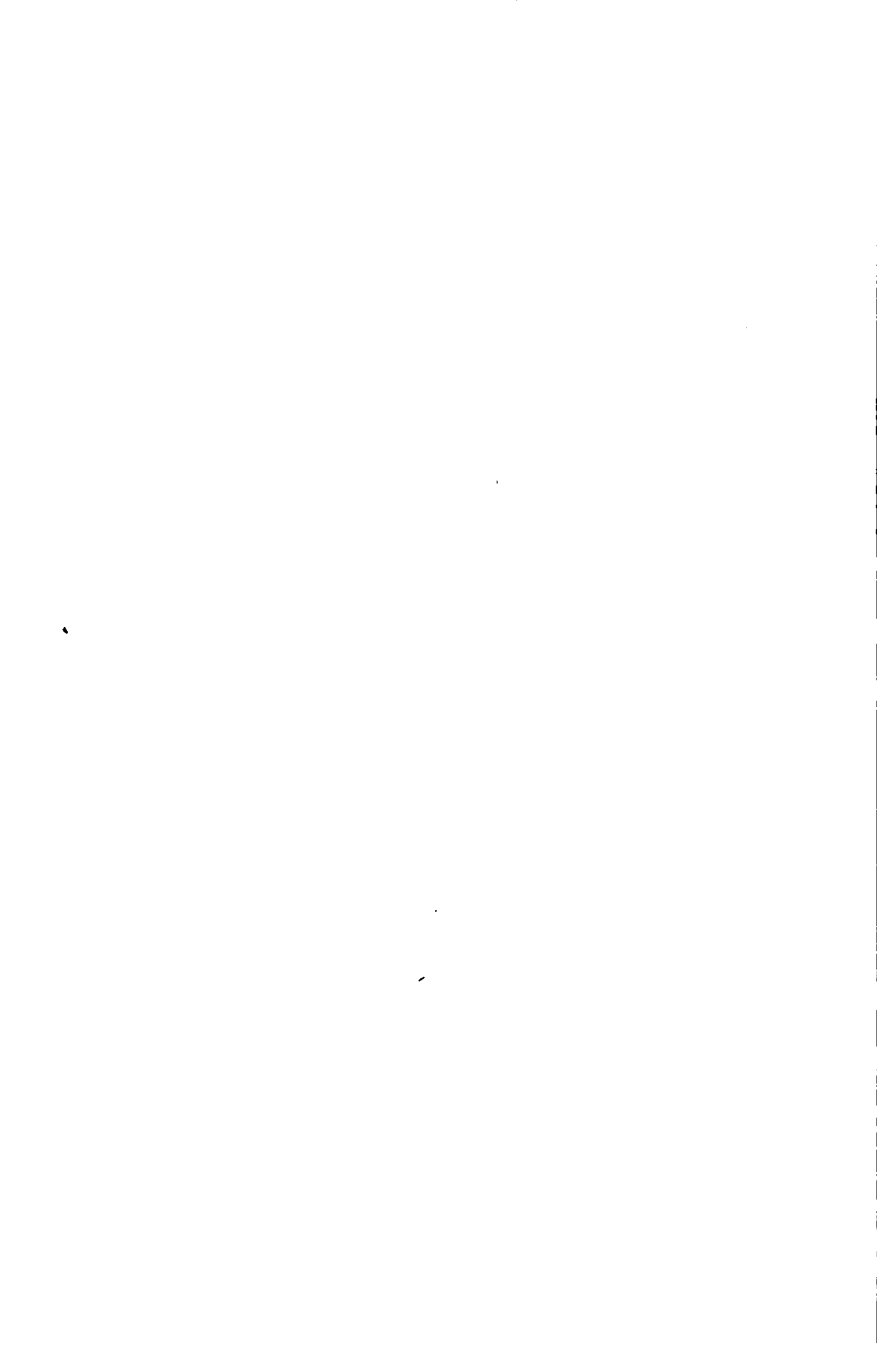
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Chapter the First.

FRED HARLOWE'S TROUBLES.

“ Full little knowest thou that has not tried,
What hell it is in suing long to bide ;
To loose good dayes that might be better spent,
To waste long nights in pensive discontent,
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow ;
To feed on hope, to pine with feare and sorrow.
Unhappie wight, born to disastrous end,
That doth his life in so long tendance spend ! ”

SPENSER.



Chapter the First.

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ful man : he was a keen and intelligent sportsman, and his position as M. F. H. was eminently congenial to him ; he had inherited an ample fortune from his mother, and had therefore no sordid cares to harass him ; and he enjoyed so fair an amount of popularity that he had every prospect of being returned for the county, should he choose to offer himself as the Conservative candidate at the next vacancy.

In person, and somewhat, too, in character, he resembled his uncle ; he possessed that divine attribute of a superior and blue-blooded race—the Harlowe nose ; and he also could boast of a fair sample of the Harlowe upper lip ; but in colouring he was dark and almost swarthy, whilst in figure he was tall and spare. It will be therefore understood that Mr. Harlowe was by no means a handsome man.

He lived in a square red-brick house just outside the village of Mepham, that stood in an angle between the lane leading thereto and the Truxworth high road, and was about a mile distant from Mepham park. The Red

House, as it was called, was only divided from the road in front by a laurel hedge and a strip of grass a few yards in width. It was an old-fashioned and comfortable house, and had once possessed a large garden behind it; this, however, had been in modern times entirely done away with, the space being covered over by a square-flagged courtyard with stables on three sides of it; beyond that, across a couple of fields, were the kennels, so that Mr. Harlowe had his work all under his own eye.

The world reckoned the South Meadowshire M. F. H. to be a happy man, but the world is often mistaken in its judgments, and on this particular afternoon Fred Harlowe, as he stares moodily into his cosy fire with his favourite hound crouched up against his gaitered legs, is saying to himself that of all men he is the most unfortunate and unlucky.

For Mr. Harlowe had set his heart upon a thing which he had apparently no chance of getting, and when this happens to a man of a dogged and tenacious disposition, then neither warmth nor good cheer, neither success nor

even sport can avail him any longer, nor serve to content him for the lack of that one thing which is beyond his reach.

Now the one thing which Mr. Harlowe lacked, and for want of which all else in life had become dross, was his cousin Constance.

Years ago he had set his heart upon her, with that slow, but unalterable determination which was in his blood, and had resolved that she should become his wife ; and then, because of her mad infatuation for a good-looking but impecunious young man, who, meteor-like, had crossed her life, Fred Harlowe had drawn back and had waited, biding his time until that folly should have died a natural death, and his own turn should come round again. Time went by, and Dick Gaskell's presumption seemed to be a thing of the remote past, forgotten and done with, and Fred's chances crept up again. He was assiduous in his attentions, which, if a trifle heavy and pondrous, were nevertheless patient and unswerving in their constancy, and yet all his perseverance seemed now to be in vain.

It was hard indeed upon him that the old love should have turned up again at the end of two years, no longer as a poor and undesirable *parti*, but as a landed proprietor with a fine old place at his back.

This is why Fred Harlowe stares into the fire, and tells himself that he is a miserable man !

When a man is forty years of age, he takes these kind of troubles badly. He loved Constance earnestly and sincerely, and was prepared to alter his whole life for her sake, should she become his wife. It was part of his matrimonial scheme that he should bid adieu to his hounds and huntsmen, and adopt politics as his profession should Constance consent to his suit ; and having been a master for ten years, he felt that he should be able to retire gracefully and becomingly from the position upon his marriage.

It had all appeared easy and feasible enough only a month ago. Constance had seemed, in her cold reserved fashion, to be more dependent upon his society than he had

ever yet known her ; her father openly encouraged him, whilst even Lady Harlowe who did not, he knew, look upon him as a brilliant match for her daughter, seemed, nevertheless, for lack of other suitors, inclined to regard his advances with equanimity, and to acquiesce in the general tendency of things to go right according to his wishes. But now that Dick Gaskell had reappeared upon the scene, everything was altered, and everybody was at odds ; Constance would hardly speak to him, and her mother discouraged his habitual attentions, and even his uncle, who had always taken his part so staunchly, shuffled and turned the subject whenever he attempted to allude to it. And then was the handsome face of his rival for ever to be seen at Cambray. What did it all mean, Mr. Harlowe asked himself savagely. What were they all plotting against him ? If Constance was engaged to this man why did not her parents announce it openly to the world and have done with it, but if they were not engaged, and Fred did not believe that they were, then what was the

fellow always hanging about for? That he was utterly unworthy of Constance, Fred was entirely convinced of. Mr. Harlowe had sat exactly opposite to Mr. Gaskell at dinner the other evening at Cambray, and if his attentions to Miss Latimer had been unobserved by Constance and her parents, they had been most keenly noted by the jealous cousin who sat opposite.

“A fickle, flirting, unprincipled fellow!” said Mr. Harlowe angrily to himself. “Constance is miles too good for him!”

It was the custom amongst many of Fred's neighbours to walk over to the Red House on Sunday afternoon; the kennels made a suitable object for inspection, and Fred was always glad to welcome his friends in his bachelor quarters. So presently in came the butler and the footman bearing trays, which they proceeded to set forth upon the study table, soda water and cut-glass spirit decanters, biscuits and sweet cakes for the ladies, and a pink satin box full of chocolate creams, which disappeared on Sunday afternoons with a

marvellous rapidity ; there were also strange and curious liqueurs, and a number of quaint little Venetian glass tumblers to drink them out of.

These preparations were barely completed, when the click of the iron gate in the laurel hedge announced the first of Mr. Harlowe's afternoon visitors.

He got up hastily and shook himself, and saw through the window his uncle and Constance coming up to the house. His face brightened at the sight, and he ran gladly to the door to welcome them both.

"This is indeed a pleasure, Constance! You don't often honour me. How are you, uncle? None the worse for the dinner-party, I hope. I haven't seen you since we were all so much amused by young Latimer's—ahem—a——"

Constance was frowning at him from behind her father ; Fred pulled up short.

"I think, Frederick, the less said about that young gentleman the better," said his lordship severely. "Miss Latimer is a very well-mannered

young lady, with whom I have no fault to find ; but I cannot say that I admire the forwardness and vulgarity of the young man of whom she has the misfortune of being the sister ; nor can I regard the gross breach of decorum, of which he was guilty at my house, as otherwise than a serious offence against myself."

"Oh come, come, uncle ; you must own that everybody was very much amused," said Fred in a conciliatory manner, as he helped his uncle off with his overcoat.

"I am grateful to my friends for their good nature in not being annoyed by the unseemliness of the unwelcome exhibition. I owe them my best thanks for their forbearance."

Then Lord Harlowe sat down and complained of the coldness of the wind.

Constance had taken the chair that faced the window ; she had not yet spoken to her cousin ; she seemed absent and distracted. Presently Fred saw her pale face flush as the gate once more opened, and a procession of persons came two by two from under the laurels. The first couple was Mr. Gaskell and

Eve Latimer; then came Gerald and Mrs. Clitheroe; after them Miss Lamb, the governess, and Mr. Clitheroe, and lastly, the three Clitheroe children tumbled in together, quarrelling vehemently as to who should carry a small basket, which was in imminent danger of being torn into pieces between them.

All these people, instead of coming up to the front door as Lord Harlowe had done, turned short off to the right through the archway of the stable door, for it very often happened that Mr. Harlowe's friends betook themselves unceremoniously first to the inspection of the horses and the hounds, and came into the house, on their way back, to rest and partake of the refreshments prepared for them before their return home.

"The Clitheroes," observed Fred, "and two of the Latimers and Gaskell; I wonder how they all got to the door together."

"Oh, they were to lunch at the Clitheroes," said Constance quickly; "at least Mr. Gaskell was to," and then she blushed. And Fred instantly perceived, with a pang, that it was to

this fact that he owed the pleasure of a visit from her, for she very seldom came to his house.

A sort of rage filled him that it should be so, that she should care for this man who treated her so cavalierly, who apparently was as happy flirting with Miss Latimer or any other woman as in her society ; that he should be of more value to her than all the patient love and devotion that he had laid at her feet for so long. He did not understand that his very patience and silence had ruined his cause. He had waited for her, he told himself proudly ; but had he waited too long ?

He became possessed with a great desire to learn the worst ; and when he saw Constance's face pale again and dejected, as the merry procession of visitors passed out of sight, he felt he had no longer any heart to sit there chatting about the east wind and the weather-glass.

"Constance," he said to her gently, "go out and join them at the kennels ; I have a little business to talk over with your father ; we will come out in a few minutes."

And it pained him again to see how gladly she went away.

"Uncle," said Fred, as soon as they were alone, "are you going to give your daughter to me, or to Richard Gaskell?"

He was leaning back against the mantelshelf; he looked down earnestly—almost sternly—at the old man, who was leaning comfortably back in a deep arm-chair. When he heard his nephew's question, however, he sat bolt upright.

"Dear me, Fred, how very abrupt you are! You—you have never asked me to give you my daughter."

"And Dick Gaskell has, I suppose," he said bitterly; "but you must have known that I have wished to marry her for years. Are they engaged?"

"Oh, dear, no; nothing of the sort!" replied Lord Harlowe rather nervously—for Fred was his heir, and the only man on earth, perhaps, to whom he considered himself bound to give an account of his actions. "Mr. Gaskell is only paying his addresses to Constance."

Fred kicked a log in the fire impatiently with his boot. "Pooh!—what does that mean? He is paying addresses to Miss Latimer, too, I should say—a male flirt!"

"You don't think so, do you, Fred? Ah, if that should be the case, I should undoubtedly refuse my consent; it is only conditional upon his conduct, past and present, that I have allowed things to go on as they are."

"Tell me frankly, uncle, *how* are things at present, and what are my chances with my cousin?" said Fred firmly.

"Well, Fred, as far as I am concerned, I'd far rather have you for a son-in-law than any other man on earth; but the girl has a fancy for this young fellow; and, though she called him an audacious upstart two years ago, my lady is all on his side now that he has come into Hollowcroft, and of course it is an unobjectionable match; and *you* did not come forward my dear boy, so the end of it was that I said I would allow the engagement to take place in time, if his character was satisfactory."

“And is it satisfactory, my lord?”

“Ah, there’s the rub! who can tell? Or what he has been doing with himself these last two years? I’ve heard rumours, nephew—rumours of a very unpleasant nature—about that young man; and yet, how is one to get to the bottom of it?”

“I will make it my business to get to the bottom of it, uncle!” answered Fred Harlowe determinedly. “I, too, have heard rumours; and I am convinced that Richard Gaskell is unworthy of my cousin. Shall we go out and join the others?”



Chapter the Second.

AT THE KENNELS.

“——See there with count'nance blith
And with a courtly grin, the fawning hound
Salutes thee cowering, his wide opening nose
Upward he curls, and his large sloe-black eyes
Melt in soft blandishments and humble joy.”
SOMERVILLE'S “Chace.”





CHAPTER II.

AT THE KENNELS.

“—See there with count’nance blith
And with a courtly grin, the fawning hound
Salutes thee cow’ring, his wide op’ning nose
Upward he curls, and his largesloe- black eyes
Melt in soft blandishments and humble joy.”

SOMERVILLE’S “Chace.”

THERE had been a great many discordant elements in the luncheon party, at the Clitheroes’, on that particular Sunday. It was with the greatest difficulty that Gerald had persuaded his sister to accept the verbal invitation which Lucy had sent to her by him. Eve did not like Mrs. Clitheroe, and, although she was too wise to say much about it, she was very well aware that Gerald went too often to her house, and that it was a pity that his name should be so often coupled with hers.

“Not that there is any harm in her,” as she said to Tom, unconsciously repeating the

popular verdict concerning Lucy; "but she is very silly, and she likes the world to think that Gerald is devoted to her."

"I suppose Gerald likes it to be thought so too."

"Oh, as to Gerald, I've no patience with him, and I confess I don't understand him. I have always given him credit for a few brains, and what on earth he can see in that silly, little empty-headed doll, I am really at a loss to imagine!"

"It's at all events a safe infatuation," yawned Charlie from over his novel by the fire; "he can't marry her, and I don't suppose he would be such a fool to run away with her; don't fret over it, Eve, making love to a married woman is like the use of tobacco, it keeps a man from worse vices."

And then Gerald came in, and nothing more was said. All the same, Eve kept on declaring all Saturday that she didn't mean to lunch at the Clitheroes on the morrow.

"Why not take me instead?" suggested Tom with a grin. "I could bring the banjo!"

"Oh, *you*, Tom ! You are disgraced for ever," cried Eve ; " you'll never be able to show your face to South Meadowshire again ! "

" They'll see my back pretty often, I hope, when I'm ahead of the ' Quality,' on Brown Bess. Did you speak to Gaskell yesterday, Gerald ? I never got within hailing distance of him all day."

Eve became suddenly engrossed in twisting up Balzac's moustache. She had not hunted on the previous day, and nobody had happened to mention Dick's name. She had not dared to ask if he had been out, for it had come to this with her, that with those lynx-eyed young brothers looking on, she was fearful of mentioning his name, lest her rising colour should betray her new-born secret.

" Oh, yes, I had a few words with him," said Gerald, in answer to Tom's question ; " and, by the way, he is going to lunch at Mrs. Clitheroe's to-morrow, too, so we shall be quite a large party, and walk over to the kennels afterwards. You had better come, Eve."

" Very well, Gerald, since you wish it so

much. I am sure I don't want to be disagreeable, I will come." And then she slipped Balzac off her knee and left the room.

She had not, however, got half way down the passage before there came hurried steps behind her.

"Eve!"

"Well!"

The passage at Misrule was narrow. Eve leant against the wall on one side, Tom leant against the wall opposite, there was but a yard or so between them. Their two young faces so like, and yet so unlike, glared at each other—Eve all on the defensive, her lovely eyes full of anger and defiance; Tom, angry, too, but authoritative and aggressive, and bent on saying his say.

"You are going to make a fool of yourself, Eve."

"Tom! What do you mean?"

"About Gaskell. You are spoons on him. Deny it if you can."

"I don't understand you," very haughtily and angrily.

"Oh, yes, you understand well enough. You are going to the Clitheroes' because you heard he is to be there."

"I am going because Gerald wishes it!"

"Fiddlesticks! Eve, you are all changed since that night that Gaskell came here. Don't fancy you can blind *me*! I can see you are spoons on him, and don't you suppose he is going to marry you; everybody says he is engaged to Miss Harlowe—you are just wasting your time."

"Tom, how dare you speak to me like that! And—and—I don't believe it—not a word of it—let me pass, Tom."

"No, I'm not going to let you pass, not till I've said it all; what would the others say if they guessed as I do, that you are ready to break our compact and marry the first man you get spooney on?"

"Tom, I won't listen to you! You've no right to insult me," cried Eve furiously, crimson with shame and anger.

"I don't insult you, Eve, but you sha'n't let yourself down about a fellow who is engaged

to another woman. Oh! just you wait and see if it isn't true; there, you may go now; you are the best and dearest girl on earth, and I'm not going to stand by and see you making a fool of yourself, without giving you warning."

She flew by him, speechless with rage, and locked herself into her own room. And there was war between Eve and little Tom for the space of twenty-four hours.

All the way to the Clitheroes', next day, as she sat by Gerald's side in the high dog-cart, she was very quiet and silent, thinking over what he had said to her. Nobody but Tom would have dared to speak to her like that; neither Gerald nor Charlie would have done so; but, then, did not Tom love her far better than either of them; and was not she forced to own, to herself, that Tom was in a measure right? It was terrible to her, that he should have dragged her sweet, unspoken secret to the light of day; that he should have degraded that shy, happy flutter at her innermost soul, by that horrible, low word "spoons"; but terrible.

and horrible as it was, was there not a great deal of truth in what he had said? Was not her fancy caught by this good-looking man of whom she knew next to nothing, and did not her thoughts dwell almost incessantly upon him? Was it possible, indeed, that she was to be the first to break that solemn compact of celibacy, which she and her brothers had entered upon; that she was indeed ready to leave her boys for the first man who had spoken soft words to her and looked soft looks at her? Eve took shame to herself at the thought. "What would they do without me?" she said to herself remorsefully; "who would see to their clothes, and their dinners? They would be lost, utterly lost!"

And if this portion of Tom's accusation was so nearly true, how then about that other thing, which he had stated so authoritatively, as a fact—that Mr. Gaskell was engaged to Miss Harlowe? Could this, too, be true?

Eve could not believe it. She knew very little indeed about the ways of lovers, but she remembered certain words and certain looks

which disinclined her to believe that Dick Gaskell could possibly care about Constance Harlowe.

Nevertheless, Tom's words bore fruit, and she was distinctly reserved in her manner to Dick when they met, and she slipped so quickly into her place at table, between her host and one of the children, that Dick had no opportunity of sitting next to her.

For Mr. Clitheroe was always at home on Sundays, and his burly figure and black beard loomed unbeautifully behind the sirloin of beef at the further end of the table. Miss Lamb, who, with her charges, lunched with their betters on the Sabbath, sat on his left hand by his special invitation.

"Such a mercy!" whispered Mrs. Clitheroe to Gerald; "James has taken such a fancy to Lamb lately, he always will make her sit by him!"

"Indeed!" Gerald looked up sharply. It seemed to him that Mr. Clitheroe was whispering to Miss Lamb in an unpleasantly familiar manner, for her pale face had flushed slightly,

and she looked annoyed and distressed. Gerald felt a strong inclination to kick his host.

"Why don't you call her down here. She doesn't seem to like what your husband is saying."

"How quixotic you always are, my dear boy. He is only paying her compliments; he admires her, you know."

"Oh, really!" For the life of him he could not help the blind rage that stormed helplessly in his blue eyes, as he uttered those two simple words.

Lucy laughed. "One would think you were in love with Miss Lamb yourself, Gerald!" she whispered back. She was not jealous—she was only amused. Ever since that evening, when Gerald had so unluckily yielded to temptation and the force of circumstances as to kiss her, Lucy had adopted a tone of absolute proprietorship over him, which filled him with dismay and consternation. She was for ever alluding to that touching episode with so many tender little sighs, and such meaning glances, that Gerald felt that she must look upon him as

a brute, because he did not take her hints and repeat the offence. She called him her "dear boy," too, more frequently than heretofore, and a good deal of the pretence about "dear James" was dropped, and Mrs. Clitheroe treated him to sundry confidences, respecting the private habits and customs of her liege lord and master, which Gerald did not at all desire to be made acquainted with.

She told him, for instance, with a good deal of indignation, and a few carefully screwed out tears, that though she would rather die than own it to any other living soul, yet to her "dear boy" she felt constrained to open her heart about James's "goings on."

He was always running after some woman or other, she told him—this was the meaning of his many absences—he was anything but a model husband! So sad, was it not, for her and for her darling children! In fact, by many dark and mysterious hints, she gave him to understand that Don Juan was an angel of light as compared to Mr. Clitheroe.

It was, therefore, small wonder that Gerald

was filled with absolute horror at the bare suggestion that his erotic host might have taken a fancy to Miss Lamb.

"You are not in love with Lamb yourself, are you?" repeated Lucy, looking at him quite sweetly and fondly, with an arch uplifting of her eyebrows.

"I, my dear little woman! What an idea! —you ought to know better!" he added sentimentally, and turning quite unaccountably red—a blush which Lucy did not fail to attribute to his unfortunate affection for herself. Truly our evil deeds bring a swift retribution upon our heads, and Gerald had to pay very dearly for his folly.

"Don't you bother about Lamb, dear boy; she really likes it, you know, what governess wouldn't? It gives her importance; besides, she is quite capable of taking care of herself, and it is really a mercy for me, for it keeps James in such a good temper if he has somebody to make love to."

After that it will be readily believed that Gerald Latimer had very little appetite for his

lunch. Neither, indeed, had Mr. Gaskell, who, having come there expressly to meet Eve, was much disgusted to find himself separated by the whole length of the table from her. By the time, however, that the party had reached Fred Harlowe's house, Dick had succeeded, by many skilful dodgings and manœuvrings, in making himself Eve's companion.

Although it is, perhaps, doubtful whether he would have congratulated himself upon doing so with equal fervour, had he known that his entrance into the gate of the Red House, by Eve's side, was witnessed by Constance Harlowe from the window of her cousin's study.

When Constance came out of the back door of the house that opened into the stable yard, she found that the party had already gone on to the kennels. She went slowly across the fields, along the narrow footpath that led up the green incline behind the stables. She was in no hurry to join the others. Something had come into her slow-working mind that troubled her vaguely—a something which the

sight of Dick, coming in through the laurels at Eve's side, had awakened in her. Dick's face had been turned towards his companion ; there had been a light in his eyes—something that was almost tenderness in the softened expression of his handsome features. Constance had seen that look in her lover's face once before, long ago, when he had first told her he loved her, under the camellia bushes in Mrs. Clitheroe's conservatory. She never saw it now—never, until just now, and it was pretty Eve Latimer, not herself, who had called it forth. “ Oh ! what did it mean ? ” said Constance to herself miserably and sadly.

The jealousy which in another and stronger-natured woman would have called forth anger and an indignant desire of explanation, only filled poor timid Constance with a wretched hopelessness. Why had her parents so tied her hands that she was powerless to speak—that there was nothing for her but to stand by and see Dick's fickle fancy transfer itself to younger and fairer women, and to feel herself neglected and passed over ? And then she

turned the corner of the path and suddenly came upon a charming scene.

A great baying and bow-owing, a mass of moving canine bodies, white and tan and black, and Eve in the kennel-yard alone in the very middle of them all. Great, limpid eyes cast up wistfully at her, smooth heads pressed lovingly against her, heavy white paws upon her arms and her shoulders—and Eve, supremely happy, calling her favourites by their names, hugging their big heads, kissing their satin foreheads, and making friends with every hound in the pack.

Her face is flushed and eager; the red silk handkerchief round her throat reflects its colour in her cheeks and on her rosy lips, her eyes dance with pleasure and delight—such as none but a true lover of dogs can ever enter into. Even Constance is forced to stand still and admire so bright and charming a picture. Nobody notices her in the background. “Oh, Miss Latimer, do come out—it frightens me to death to see you!” cries Mrs. Clitheroe affectedly. “They will bite you, I am sure!”

Eve laughs merrily. The Clitheroe children, who have brought sweet biscuits in that covered basket, over which they have been fighting for the space of two miles, hand them timidly to her, one by one, through the iron railings.

“Give mine to that nice dog with the white tail, Miss Latimer!”

“And mine to the darling with the brown head!”

“And this ginger-nut to that big one!” they cry.

“But I don’t think they will eat ginger-nuts, Lily,” calls out Eve merrily in reply.

She is sublimely happy, and Dick stands by watching her with all his heart in his eyes. Was ever woman so beautiful and so bewitching in her natural grace and her frank fearlessness!

“A creature not too pure and good,
For human nature’s daily food.”

And this is the girl whom Lady Harlowe has dared to call fast and hoydenish and unlady-like!

He leans against the closed gateway looking at her admiringly—he is falling deeper and deeper daily into the sweet entrancement that she is weaving all unconsciously around him, and, manlike, he is determined to be blind and deaf to the consequences of his self-abandonment.

It is not in Dick's nature to restrain himself or to deny himself any pleasure or gratification for the sake of any future consideration.

The cords which bind him to Constance Harlowe are so intangible, the magnetism which draws him towards Eve is so great and so irresistible! He neither reflects nor reasons—he knows vaguely that honour and reason bind him to Constance; he chooses to shut his eyes to the wrong he may be doing to Eve. It seems to him that love for her has so possessed him, that he is powerless to resist or to struggle against his fate, and that there is nothing for it but to yield to his destiny, whithersoever it may chance to lead him. Never has she seemed to him more utterly lovely than at this moment.

"They will tear you to pieces!" he says smiling at her gently, just to see whether or no she will take the hint from him.

And she does. She meets his eye and comes out of the yard instantly, pushing back the boisterous caresses of the hounds who bound after her tumultuously and roughly, with her outstretched hands. And Dick, opening the gate to her, takes one of them in its little dogskin glove and draws her swiftly out, shutting to the gate quickly against the black noses that are crowding eagerly together in a wild struggle to follow her.

And somehow it happens that the rest of the party have moved on. Edith Lamb has been forced to run after her charges, who have begun to squabble in a distant corner of the field, and Gerald, who has been watching for his opportunity, slips away quickly after her. Mrs. Clitheroe, too, has moved away uneasily in the same direction, followed by her James. Dick and Eve are for a moment virtually alone, and so he keeps her hand, holding it out at arm's length, whilst he brushes the

dusty marks of the dogs' paws off her brown cloth dress and jacket.

"I never saw any woman so fond of animals in my life," he says to her, as he stoops over her dusty skirts.

"They are worth all the men in the world!" replies Eve saucily.

Then he lifts his handsome head and looks at her; he half draws her to him by the hand he still holds, and, below his breath, he murmurs one word—one little word—which Eve hears not only with her ears, but with every tingling, throbbing fibre within her.

"*Darling!*" he whispers.

And then suddenly he drops her hand and starts away from her, so that she looks round frightened and startled.

"How do you do, Mr. Gaskell?—how do you do, Miss Latimer?" says a quiet, slow voice behind them.

Did Constance Harlowe hear that one whispered word?

Chapter the Third.

MY LORD AND MY LADY.

“Thrift, Thrift, Horatio ! the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables,
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven,
Or ever I had seen that day.”

“Hamlet,” SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER III.

MY LORD AND MY LADY.

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables,
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven,
Or ever I had seen that day."

"Hamlet," SHAKESPEARE.

It has been wisely said that, be a man ever so heroic, he is never a hero to his *valet de chambre*. There is certainly no situation amongst all the many chances and changes of this troublesome world, where it is more difficult to maintain a due regard for individual dignity of character, as during those incomplete stages of the toilet to which all men alike are subjected at certain moments of their daily life. It is a period during which the vainest man alive ardently desires for solitude. There are two persons, however, whom no man can shut out from this inner sanctum of his existence. The one is his

valet, and the other is the wife of his bosom.

I have said elsewhere that Lady Harlowe was a clever woman, and her talents were chiefly shown in the manner in which she managed a naturally unmanageable husband.

She was acutely alive to the value of a judiciously chosen opportunity, and she was well aware that a man is never so completely taken at a disadvantage as when, shorn of all the superfluous trappings and external attributes of his station, he is reduced to that dead level of prosaic detail which surrounds him in his own dressing-room.

Lord Harlowe, in the full panoply of a simple yet dignified evening toilet, or clad in the ponderous solemnity of frock-coat, satin stock, and gill-like shirt-collars, adorned furthermore by heavy and antique jewellery, a massive gold seal depending from his fob, an ancient and rare cameo pin decorating his bosom, and an imposing signet ring, engraved with all the family arms and quarterings, upon his little finger, is a personage who

is hedged about, as royalty is said to be, by a certain splendour and divinity before which all lesser mortals are constrained to abase themselves in reverential humility. But Lord Harlowe in shirt-sleeves, with his braces hanging down his back, unshorn and collarless, struggling helplessly with his shirt-studs, is a very ordinary old gentleman indeed, and is wholly uncalculated to inspire either awe or reverence in anybody.

Lady Harlowe, clad in a comfortable and eminently appropriate evening-gown of faded puce satin, having desired her lord to dismiss his valet, and planted herself with her feet upon the fender by his dressing-room fire, has selected the moment with judicious precision for an encounter of a serious nature.

"I never seem to get you quite alone," she had said in excuse for her intrusion; "just these few minutes before the dinner-bell rings are often my only opportunity of speaking quietly to you."

Lord Harlowe clears his throat and

murmurs, "Certainly, my love," with a vague uneasiness.

He is standing with his back to her, facing his dressing-glass, and is laboriously buttoning on his collar at the back of his neck. The effort of adjusting the two over-starched garments together is making him very red in the face. He wished that Lady Harlowe had not asked him to send Simpson away just at this crucial moment, he wished she had chosen a more appropriate time for her confidences, that she was not always so much quicker over her dressing than he was; but he had been too courteous to express his innocent desires in words, and for all his wishing he was perforce obliged to resign himself to her presence.

"Theophilus," says Lady Harlowe solemnly—and when she calls him by his christian name Lord Harlowe trembles, for she never does so save on the most serious occasions—"Theophilus, it has become my duty as a woman and a mother to speak to you concerning the happiness of our daughter.

Constance is suffering acutely from the uncertainty and suspense which envelop her future ; her health is beginning to be seriously affected ; her appetite is failing, her nights are sleepless, and her maid is obliged to take in all her dresses."

This, and much more in the same strain, was how Lady Harlowe attacked the family autocrat upon the subject of Constance's engagement.

For Constance in her misery had gone to her mother upon that dreadful Sunday afternoon when so much that threatened her love and her happiness had been revealed to her ; the poor girl had come home half-distracted with wretchedness, and had poured out her tears and her woes at her mother's knees.

"Mamma, if I may not be openly engaged to him, I shall lose him!" she cried despairingly ; "that Latimer girl will take him from me."

"Oh, my dear, that is nonsense ; how could any man compare her with you, a nobody

like that, an untaught, fast little thing with no connections, and no advantages!"

"But, mamma, she is so pretty, and her clothes seem to fit her so much better than mine—and—and she is younger, too—oh, I know, I know, she will get him away from me!"

"Constance, this is sheer folly! It is only your own imagination, love."

And then amidst tears and broken-hearted sobs, Constance divulged at length the secret burden of her woe.

"Oh, no, no—it isn't imagination, indeed—indeed it isn't! I heard him myself—with my own ears, call her—oh, such a *dreadful* name!"

"What did he call her? Why can't you speak out?"

"He called her—*darling*."

Then at last Lady Harlowe was seriously disturbed. She pushed her daughter away, and rose angrily to her feet.

"Wretched girl!" she cried, with that readiness to lay the sin upon her own sex

which is so essentially feminine. "How I wish I had never asked her to this house. I knew that no good would come of it! I would not have your father hear of it for worlds!"

"You will not tell him, mamma!"

"Tell him? of course not! He would send Mr. Gaskell about his business at once."

"Oh, mamma, cannot you get papa to let us be openly engaged; he could not flirt with other girls, could he, if everybody knew he was to marry me?"

"I will do what I can, Constance, but you must be guided by me; you must obey me implicitly."

"Do I not always obey you, mamma!"

"I shall have to put it entirely upon your health. Let your father perceive a loss of spirits and of appetite, and I feel sure that he will not be too severe upon you. I dare not, of course, tell him what you have told me about that horrid girl; that must be a secret between you and me, my dear."

And so Lady Harlowe brought the whole battery of her resources to bear upon her unlucky husband in that hour of his weakness—when deprived of the services of his valet—he was grappling ineffectually with his shirt-collar.

“When—I tell you—that Fr—Frederick has spoken—to me!” gasped Lord Harlowe, being nearly throttled, the words came out in jerks. “Why—not—let the other—young man—go.”

“But, my dear Theophilus, your daughter’s happiness is concerned! You do not seem to consider that Constance is deeply attached to Mr. Gaskell, whereas she is not at all in love with her cousin.”

And then Lord Harlowe turned round and made a last effort at dignity, gazing at his wife sternly and fixedly.

“My lady, young persons were taught in my day to consider the wishes of their parents in the matter of their marriage; a modest girl should regard her father as the best judge of the man who is likely to make her a suit-

able husband. Now, in *my* opinion, Mr. Richard Gaskell will make Constance a very unsatisfactory husband, whereas my nephew would make her a most excellent one."

And then he turned round, but was distinctly annoyed to find, on regarding himself in the mirror, that the corner of his collar, having come unbuttoned, was sticking up midway to his eye in a manner that was altogether unimpressive and somewhat ludicrous.

The sight angered him, so that he went on with the subject irritably, lashing himself gradually into a rage over it.

"I have no opinion of that young man—none whatever. Neither has Frederick. He tells me he is a flirt—a male flirt! those were the words he used, and his antecedents are vague. Frederick gives me to understand that he has heard most unpleasant rumours."

"I don't think you should take Fred's words implicitly; of course he is an interested person," pleaded Lady Harlowe, who was determined to see her daughter the mistress of Hollowcroft if it were possible. "I am sure,

that Richard Gaskell has proved the sincerity of his affection for Constance, and, besides, if our child loves him——”

“Love,” here remarked Lord Harlowe, “is an over-rated passion. I am aware that love marriages are now the fashion. But at the risk of seeming to be behind the times, I must be allowed to say that I consider love to be an inefficient basis for married happiness. Compatibility of temper, a mutual regard and esteem, the wise approbation of parents and guardians, together with a suitable conformity of rank and family, these are the things which were looked to in a past generation, and in many other countries of the present day, in order to lay the foundation of a successful and irreproachable marriage. It has been left to the spirit of innovation, which is the curse of England at the present day, to set up a totally different standard. Young persons, scarcely out of their teens, are encouraged to form attachments, irrespective of their parents’ wishes, to fancy themselves ‘in love,’ to rush madly and blindly into the bonds of matri-

mony; to marry in haste, in short, and to repent at leisure! My lady, I ask you to turn to the daily papers of your country, and to consider the many scandals and the shameful number of cases that crowd our divorce courts, and to tell me whether this new system answers as well as did the old?"

Lady Harlowe was silent. At the bottom of her heart she knew that her lord was in a measure right. She knew, moreover, that as Dick Gaskell's wife Constance stood a poor chance of happiness, but for all that, was there not Hollowcroft? To the mother, who was essentially a woman, this was a temptation beyond her power to resist. A woman is always tempted, more or less, by the glitter of wealth and the beauty of a fine old place; it is the natural ambition which every woman must have for her daughter, if not for herself. In this respect Lady Harlowe was of inferior mould to her spouse. Not all the wealth of all the Indies could add one iota in Lord Harlowe's mind to the glory which, halo-like, surrounded a scion of the Harlowe race—if

Constance married a millionaire it would be a condescension on her part. Lady Harlowe would never have dared to mention the wordly advantages of the Gaskell match to her husband. He might be an obstinate and pompous old gentleman, with an overwhelming idea of his own importance ; he might, in comparison with herself, be a fool of the first water, but for all that, there was a certain nobility of soul about the man, in which she had no part or share, and yet which she was not slow to recognize and admire. She, whose blood was less blue than his, might be wordly and even sordid in her ambitions ; but Lord Harlowe was absolutely free from such a taint. High character, good birth, aristocratic face and figure, Grandisonian manners, if possible, these were his standards of excellence in man or woman ; money in his eyes counted for absolutely nothing.

To expatiate upon Hollowcroft and its rent-roll was no part of Lady Harlowe's programme. She had no mind to play so bad a card, but she did dwell at length upon their child's

unhappy state of mind, upon her depressed spirits, and her failing health, and in the end, because her will was the stronger of the two, she prevailed, and Lord Harlowe was brought to say as, concerning that year of probation, that he would "reconsider his decision," and that he would give Fred Harlowe to understand that his case was hopeless. Her ladyship did, indeed, in addition, venture to murmur a word relative to the undesirability of cousins marriages. But Lord Harlowe had got into his dress-coat by this time, and with it into his dignity, and he was at once master of the situation.

"My dear Eleanor," he said turning round upon her with a grave reproof on his solemn features, "I think you must forget for the moment that my sainted father and mother were first cousins; could any union be more blessed than was theirs?"

For the next few days life at Cambray went on uneventfully, and with its usual slow monotony. Lord Harlowe was digesting his wife's words and his own promises to her. He watched his

daughter narrowly, and in his slow way he came to the conclusion that her mother had been right, and that their child was not happy. Constance, who was always dull and silent, seemed, in fact, many shades more depressed than usual. She sighed frequently and ate nothing. Her father, who in his own undemonstrative fashion was fond of her, made up his mind that certainly he would take steps to render his daughter happier. One evening Mr. Gaskell came to dinner ; he, too, was silent and abstracted, and Lord Harlowe was ready to believe that the lover also was suffering the pangs of unsatisfied love. This conclusion was, on the whole, rather pleasing to his lordship's sense of importance—he liked to feel that the destinies of his fellow-creatures lay in the hollow of his hand—he did not at all dislike to be looked upon as an autocrat, and yet he did not desire to be a tyrannical one.

“Poor foolish young people,” he said to himself with quite a bland sense of gentle indulgence in his heart. “I fear I have subjected them to an ordeal that is too

severe for their strength. Well, well, perhaps one must go with the times occasionally, and I must see if I cannot improve their prospects and make things better for them." And there came into the old gentleman's mind a little scheme of making them happy, and of constituting himself *pro tem.* into the beneficent deity of their fate, which he thought he could carry out very suitably and appropriately upon the occasion of sundry festivities which were appointed to take place at Hollowcroft early in January.

All unconscious of his impending doom, Dick ate his dinner in gloomy silence. It was not, indeed, from any pangs of repressed love that he was suffering, but rather from practical discomforts connected with the most unpoetical of reasons. He hated those family dinners at Cambray Castle to which Lady Harlowe always pressed him so gushingly and earnestly.

The food was execrably cooked, and there was very little of it, for Lady Harlowe kept to her part of considering Dick as "one

of the family," and, as she told him often with beaming smiles, "she made no difference for him." How heartily Dick wished that she would make a difference; to share a cold chicken with Eve had been as a banquet in Eden to him, but to eat tough curries and over-done cutlets opposite to Constance in her unbecoming white muslins, "made high"—flanked by his future papa and mamma in law, who grumbled at each other and at life in general—savoured of anything rather than of paradise.

Even in the days of his poverty Dick had never been of those who regard a "dinner of herbs and love" as a delightful experience; he had always been particular as regards cooking, and had had a fine taste concerning wines, even at a time when to drink small beer would have been more in keeping with the condition of his finances. And now as a rich man Dick had already made a reputation for himself in South Meadowshire for the excellence of his dinners and the undeniable quality of his wine. When he had invite

Constance and her parents to his house, although they had dined with him alone, he had given them the most *recherché* repast that his French cook had been able to produce, and he considered it a real hardship that they should set before him nothing better than greasy *rechauffés* and sixteen shilling Médoc in return.

As he sat silent and dull opposite his lady-love, whilst the powdered and stockinged twins plied him with untempting viands served in all the grandeur of heavy silver dishes, Mr. Gaskell was neither unhappy nor love-stricken; he was simply and solely out of temper because the dinner was nasty.

Neither was the society of the Harlowes *en famille* calculated to raise a man's spirits. There was the usual talk about the chances of a dissolution, and the possible candidates for the county. Lord Harlowe descanted somewhat pompously upon the opinions of "my nephew," Lady Harlowe took occasion to animadvert somewhat indignantly upon the free-and-easy manners of young men of the

present day in general, and of the unlucky Tom Latimer in particular—she went on to observe that nothing much, however, was to be expected from such a source, as the Latimers were nobodies, and had no claim either to manners or good breeding. Then Dick got rather red, and said with some heat, that he liked the Latimers, and thought Tom's songs had been amusing and had given a good deal of pleasure.

“They did not please me,” remarked Lord Harlowe coldly and severely; “neither did it amuse me to find my drawing-room turned into a music-hall without my consent.”

The subject was hurriedly dropped.

Dick leant across the table and tried to make Constance talk, but Constance was too terrified by the late passage-at-arms concerning Tom Latimer to answer him in more than monosyllables, and so the conversation drooped and languished.

After dinner things were, if possible, worse. Lady Harlowe and her daughter having retired, Lord Harlowe pushed the port in the

direction of his guest, with a request that he would fill up his glass. Dick knew the port of old; he filled his glass, indeed, but he subsequently omitted to empty it. The old man started politics again, laying down the law, as old gentlemen do, and getting very angry if Dick ventured to differ from him; once or twice, indeed, Lord Harlowe contradicted him flatly in a fashion that in any other man Dick would have resented as actual rudeness, but his position with regard to Lord Harlowe, together with the difference in age between them, rendered it impossible for him to object to anything the old man chose to say. He therefore found it easier to pretend to agree to everything and to keep his own opinions to himself. Dick stifled his yawns and wished he might smoke; he even went the length of taking his silver cigarette-case out of his pocket and snapping the spring-lid playfully between his finger and thumb. But Lord Harlowe either was, or feigned to be, utterly unconscious of this delicate hint.

That a gentleman should smoke over the

dinner-table, before going back into the society of ladies, was a suggestion that would have filled him with absolute horror; it did not, in truth, enter into his soul to conceive that such a depth of iniquity could even be contemplated by any well-mannered young man, and had he but guessed at the unlawful longings which filled his companion's mind, his very hair would have stood on end with dismay. He maundered on in his slow dictatorial way, repeating himself frequently, and using a great many obsolete and unsound arguments—for he was a foolish old man, and his foolishness never was so palpable as when he imagined himself to be saying clever things, and was lucky enough to find a patient listener.

Dick resigned himself to his fate, returned the cigarette-case to his pocket, and wondered whether he should be able to keep himself awake much longer.

And then, at last, there happened something which awoke him up so thoroughly and effectually, that he felt as if he should never desire to go to sleep again.

The butler entered softly, and presented a note to his master on a silver tray, with a whisper of, "waiting for an answer," and Lord Harlowe apologized in his best Grandisonian manner to his guest.

"I am truly grieved, Mr. Gaskell, for this unavoidable interruption to our interesting conversation—would you kindly excuse me for a few seconds whilst I read and reply to this letter ; I fancy it is upon urgent business from my bailiff, otherwise I should not, of course, trouble you."

"Oh, pray, don't mention it," said Dick politely.

"I will only retire as far as the writing-table at the further end of the room. Dawes give Mr. Gaskell the newspaper."

The old man retreated, as he had said, to a distant table and busied himself with his letter.

The butler, as desired, handed the *Times* to Dick upon a silver tray.

Dick did not want to read it in the very least. He had already waded his way in the morning through all the telegrams and most

of the leading articles, and his thirst for information concerning stocks and shares had long ago been assuaged. He turned over the broad sheets, idly and purposelessly, with weary and inattentive eyes. Then suddenly he caught sight of something which sharpened every sense that he possessed into acute vitality, whilst his heart bounded forward with a wild and violent thump.

"*Crowbay.*" That was the first word, in capital letters, that might have been written in fire, so vividly did it burn into his very soul, and the second was like unto it.

"Crowbay—Avice is ill, and entreats R. G. to come to her at once to Laburnam Road."

"Are you unwell, Mr. Gaskell?" said a voice out of a fog at his side. Lord Harlowe was shaking him by the arm.

The paper had fluttered to the ground. He recalled his scattered senses with a violent effort.

"I—I don't feel very well; if you will excuse me, I think I will go home," he said falteringly. And he then went away.

Chapter the Fourth.

LABURNAM ROAD.

“ Amid the roses, fierce Repentance rears
Her snaky crest.”

THOMSON.





CHAPTER IV.

LABURNAM ROAD.

"Amid the roses, fierce Repentance rears
Her snaky crest."

THOMSON.

THAT Dick Gaskell was not altogether a bad man will, I think, be sufficiently demonstrated by the fact that on the following morning, at ten o'clock, he was taking a ticket for Euston at the booking-office of the little wayside station of Croft Road. The hunting world was there in force, too, boxing their hunters for a distant meet, and Dick was hailed with vivid indignation from many quarters.

"Why, what's the meaning of this, Gaskell; go-to-meeting clothes on a hunting morning?" cried little Major Spicer, who came up booted and spurred behind him to take his ticket for the train which was to take him and his steed to the scene of action.

"Not going to Dambaly this morning?" shouted out old Colonel Slowcombe; "why, it's the very best meet in the whole country."

"I am called up to London on business," said Dick taking up his change from the ticket counter. "I am awfully sorry to miss the day, of course."

"Oh, come, come, that's too bad of you. Here's a defaulter, Harlowe!" turning round to the master who had just come in to the crowded little station. "Gaskell is sneaking up to town; you oughtn't really to allow it."

"We shall be sorry to miss you, Mr. Gaskell," replied Fred Harlowe; he was always scrupulously polite to his rival.

Dick, into whose mind the fact of the rivalry had never as yet penetrated, answered in his usual cheery and pleasant manner.

"You can't be so sorry as I am, Mr. Harlowe; I hate missing a good thing when one's horses are fit and the weather is open, but, then—duty," with a regretful sigh; "duty, I suppose, must sometimes come before pleasure." To do Dick justice this was not a sentiment

which he often acted up to, the sensation of the duty he had in hand must have been strong upon him, indeed, to-day. Fred, who was an observant man, gave him a sharp look from under his pent eyebrows.

"Now," thought he to himself, "I wonder what takes you up to town, my friend. I am certain that the 'duty' that makes you lose a good day must be of an urgent nature indeed," for even Fred could not deny that Dick was a keen sportsman.

"Here come the Latimers," cried Major Spicer moving to the window as a crowded dogcart came dashing up outside; "by Jove, what pluck that girl has; eleven miles' drive for her, and then training, and the Lord knows how far away we shan't leave off."

"Ah, I guessed they were coming, for I saw old Greyson, their head-man, standing about near the horse-boxes."

Dick moved quickly to the window; he felt sorrier than ever that he had decided to go up to London. If he had been certain that Eve

would be out to-day, he told himself, that he would not have done so—he stood watching the Latimers get down from their cart—and cursed himself for his folly.

Mr. Harlowe had taken his ticket and turned round from the booking-grating; he looked at the group of men at the window who were watching for the Latimers to come in. Dick was saying something laughingly in answer to Major Spicer, and as he did so he closed a red silk letter-case he had in his hand and put it back into his breast-coat pocket. Fred saw a slip of paper flutter out of it on to the floor; he was on the point of directing Dick's attention to it, when, with a great chattering and laughing, the young Latimers came pouring in to the station, and Dick, with the others, started forward to greet them. They were all talking at once.

"Come, look sharp, who is going to take the tickets, we haven't a minute to spare?" cries one.

"Eve takes them, of course; nobody else has any money."

“How d’ye do, Spicer? Ah, colonel, how are you? What! not going, Gaskell?”

“Horses in, Greyson? All right, then, you can take the cart back. Come on, Tom; for goodness sake don’t stand jabbering outside. Why, here comes the train, what a good show of us, Mr. Harlowe; you can’t complain of want of energy in your flock at any rate!”

Fred had joined the jolly chattering group; not one of them had seen him pick up a little strip of printed paper from the ground, not a soul had noticed how he had half stretched out his hand, then drawn it back quickly, with a start and a flush as his eye fell upon the couple of printed lines; nor did any living being ever know how Mr. Harlowe slipped that scrap of paper hurriedly and guiltily into his own waistcoat-pocket.

Eve was taking her tickets at the grating—Dick was at her elbow.

“I am so sorry you are not going,” she whispers to him, and there is a sweet, trustful light in the red-brown eyes that glance shyly

at him ; " how tiresome for you to have to go to town."

" Do you think I would have gone had I guessed that you would be out," he whispers back tenderly.

" Single or return, Miss ? " says the ticket clerk.

" Oh, which ought I to take do you think ? "

" Single ; you can't tell where you may leave off. I would give worlds to be with you 'o-day ! " in a lower voice.

" Did you say three or four, Miss ?—one-and-eightpence more, please."

The situation did not lend itself to love-making. The porter was ringing the bell on the platform, and shouting " London train, London train," outside.

" I am off first, after all," says Dick ; " you got my invitation, of course, and you are coming ? "

" Oh, yes, are we not ? every one of us ; what fun it will be."

" Oh, I don't know," with a sigh ; " I shall see nothing of you, but when it's all over you

must ask me to have another lunch with you, and then I shall get you all to myself; will you, Eve?"

And she makes him no answer in words, only their eyes meet—his are full of a great passionate love that will not be hidden or stifled away, and hers of a sweet, happy confusion that tells him the secret of her heart as plainly as though her lips had spoken it.

"London train, sir; please take your place," says the porter at his elbow; and Dick flies out and springs into the nearest carriage as the train is beginning to move, and is borne away out of her sight.

And then the down-train came in, and was far longer getting under weigh again than the London express. There were the horse-boxes to be attached, and there was a good deal of delay and shunting backwards and forwards before the little party of sportsmen was fairly on its way to Dambaly. All the Latimers and Major Spicer got in together, filling a carriage to themselves; but the train was full, for it was market day at Truxworth, so that one or

two of the party were separated from the others, and had to find places where they could. Amongst these was Fred Harlowe, who found himself, whether by accident or on purpose, none perhaps but himself could tell, in a second-class compartment amongst a number of farmers and country people.

When the train began to move, Fred felt in his waistcoat-pocket and pulled out a little strip of printed paper, which he studied long and earnestly. It was an advertisement cut out of yesterday's *Times*. He sat staring at it fixedly for a long, long time, then he slowly folded it up and hid it away safely in an inner flap of his leather pocket-book.

"So that is what has taken him up to town!" he said to himself; "a woman advertising for him. Who is she, I wonder? It is as I thought, he is no fit husband for my cousin; and I did right, yes, perfectly right, to take it, the end justifies the means in this case."

And then he sat quite still all the rest of the short journey, staring out of the carriage window and revolving many things in his

mind. . . . Avice sat at the window in the dreary little front parlour in Laburnam Road doing nothing. Her hands were crossed idly upon her lap, her head leant wearily against the back of the hard horsehair armchair in which she was propped, and her eyes were fixed sadly upon the little square of soot-grimed garden outside, the dull suburb road beyond, and the pale winter mist that lay sodden and chill between the mean-looking little house and its opposite neighbours. Mrs. Mines bustled backwards and forwards between the parlour and an inner room behind folding doors beyond it.

"Come, now, rouse yourself a bit, my dearie," she said kindly as she swept up the ashes in the fender and made up the fire. "It's no good moping over the past; the advertisement was in the paper yesterday, and you are sure to get some news soon."

"I can't bear to think of all the expense I've put you to, Mrs. Mines."

"Oh, never you fret about that, it's lucky as the parlours was empty and you could have

the rooms. I'm sure, my dear, you're very welcome, and, as to the trouble, why, I make nothing of that."

"You are very kind!" said Avice sighing.

"It's only the doctor's bill as I worry over," went on the good landlady as she proceeded to sweep up the hearth and "tidy up" the room, "and that I make no doubt your husband will pay."

A burning blush covered Avice's thin face, and she bent her head.

She had been at some pains to concoct an elaborate story in order to account to her kind landlady for the strangeness of her position, but the description which she gave her of a secret marriage and the subsequent manner in which she had lost sight of her husband was hardly calculated to impose upon the most credible person, and it is more than possible that Mrs. Mines only took her lodger's account of herself for exactly what it was worth; but being a wise woman as well as a kindly one, she discreetly held her tongue, and pretended to put faith in the somewhat

incoherent statements which Avice had volunteered, although, no doubt, she had a shrewd notion of the real state of the case.

“Oh, but supposing he should never see the paper—never come?” cried Avice piteously.

“Then, my dear, you must just put your shoulder to the wheel and work for yourself. Ah! you should see my niece—my brother William’s daughter! Her mother was a lady born, and Will was only a dancing master, just as he is now, only that he taught in the first families when he was young—and a handsome fellow he was to be sure! ‘Monsieur Agneau,’ he calls himself, just because the French, as I’ve been told, is mostly dancing masters. Well, and his wife was a sweet young lady, who was at a boarding school, and she ran away with my brother and married him, and all her fine relations was angry and wouldn’t have anything to do with her; but, poor young thing, it wasn’t for long that troubled her, for she died when her baby was born, and then her father, he came forward and paid

the funeral expenses; and gave Will five hundred pounds for the baby. So what does Will do but puts it by, and when she is old enough, spends it all on her education; and, there, she's been to France, and to Germany, and goodness knows where, learning languages and accomplishments, and now she's as good as the best of them! A governess in quite a high fam'ly in the country. What do you think of that!"

"And do you ever see your niece, Mrs. Mines?" asked Avice getting interested, as people who have been ill always do in any little history that is told them.

"Oh, law, yes! Oh, she's a good girl, is our Edith, and not a bit proud nor stuck up, although she is so clever and so handsome. She writes often to me, and spends her holiday here; and she sends part of her wages to her father every quarter, and a blessing that is to him, poor man, for I don't think the class pays very well. Oh, she's a good girl; so you mustn't lose heart, my dear, for there's plenty of work to be done in the world."

LABURNAM ROAD.

"Ah, but I haven't got five hundred pounds, Mrs. Mines."

"No, but you might have died, as Will's poor young wife did—oh, there is always something to be thankful for, my dear."

And then Avice was silent, wondering whether her father would ever now hold out a helping hand to her, and let her have any of his life's savings—now that she had forfeited all claim to his love and support. "Never, unless Dick will marry me," she said to herself. For Avice did not know how the "Lady Avice" had put out to sea upon the storm-tossed waters on that night, and had never come back to Crowbay.

Mrs. Mines had bustled away into the inner room. Afterwards she told her brother, the dancing master, that she could not well remember how long she was there—she had just made the bed and tidied up the place a bit, and poured out Avice's tonic into a medicine glass—when all at once she heard a great cry from the next room, and a bell at the door, and a bustling in the hall of the

little maid-of-all-work, flying to open the door, and she just managed to get the lid down upon the saucepan ; but by the time she had run into the front room, there was a dark-haired gentleman kneeling by Avice's arm-chair, and she, with her arms round his neck, crying and laughing, and hugging him all at once.

"And then," said Mrs. Mines, "in course, I shut the door, and left them together, Will, for I didn't wish to pry into the poor girl's secrets ; but I do hope as how he'll behave fair to her, and that things will come right."

As for Dick, he was well nigh strangled by the energy of Avice's embraces, which was a lucky solution of difficulties for him, as for the first ten minutes he found that no explanations were required.

"I had no idea you were ill !" he managed to gasp forth at length. "What was the matter, Avice ?"

Whereupon Avice clung to him again, burying her head upon his shoulder, and murmuring incoherent things.

And then Dick rose abruptly, almost roughly, from his knees, with a dark flush upon his face.

"Not that," he said hurriedly, "my God, not *that!*"

"Oh, don't look so angry, Dick! I thought you guessed it long ago—and I was so very, very ill, and never knew till afterwards, and then it was dead. You will marry me now, won't you, and put everything right for me? Father will never forgive me till you do." But Dick answered not. He only paced away from her across the tiny room and leant against the mantelshelf, hiding his face in his hands.

A deep remorse, a wild regret, and, above all, an overpowering dismay filled his soul. It was terrible to him to be thus confronted with his past sins, to find that the things he had hoped were comfortably buried and laid aside, so that they were forgotten and done for, had risen again, hydra-headed, and were forcing themselves back into the living reality of the present.

A perfect despair possessed him in those first

few moments, and there flashed, phantom-like, through his brain, not his engagement to Constance Harlowe, but Eve's face as she had looked at him this morning—Eve's gold-brown eyes filled with trustful tenderness, Eve's sweet, tremulous lips as they had smiled at him shyly, her trim little figure in its dark cloth habit, the tiny varnished boot tip peeping forth beneath its edge—it all came back to him like a ravishing picture of lost hopes and shattered delights, such a retrospect as to a falling soul may perchance be given of the "might have been" of his ruined and blasted existence, Dick groaned aloud.

Then came Avice's voice at his elbow. She had risen with difficulty from her chair, and tottered across the room, holding on by the furniture as she came, for she was still very weak from her illness.

"Oh, yes, Dick," she was saying to him, "I know you'll make an honest woman of me, won't you? You don't know how angry father was; he *cursed* me, and he said he'd kill you, and I ran away from home and walked all the

way to Exeter ; but for all his anger, if you'll just marry me right off, say next week, and take me back as your wife, why I know then he'd forgive us. And there's that money, you know, he promised you ; I know he'd give it to you if you was to behave rightly by me."

And then he turned and looked at her, struck dumb by her words.

Marry her next week ! Why it was next week that half South Meadowshire was invited to Hollowcroft ; that the house was to be full from attic to cellar ; that there was to be a lawn meet, a hunt breakfast, a dinner-party and a ball—it was to be his house-warming ! And Avice wanted him to marry her "next week ?" He could almost have laughed aloud at the irony and the mockery of the idea. Marry her ! Had he ever desired to marry her ? Not even in the maddest days of his infatuation, and now less than ever—for does a man ever wish one whom he has brought to such a pass as Avice to become his wife—and then he looked at her. Once upon a time Avice had seemed to him to be a lovely girl, in her short cotton

skirts, and scarlet shawl, with her bare, brown legs gleaming in the transparent pools of salt water, with her plump arms plying her shrimping net, with the sunshine beating down upon her bleached yellow hair, and all the background of sky and sea and sand behind her; yes, she had seemed delightful to him then, everything about her had appeared picturesque and suitable. As he had known her first, the most fastidious of critics must have admired her. But a gentleman cannot marry a fisherman's daughter, and show her about with bare legs and a shrimping net ever after, and Avice, as Dick looked at her now, with the eyes of disenchantment, was no longer the girl he had idly wooed upon the coast of Devonshire.

Avice, in a long dark stuff gown of coarse texture, with clumsy ill-made shoes, cheap lace collar and cuffs that were not spotlessly clean, with the clear tan-red faded out of her somewhat thin cheeks, and the rough shock of hair, rough still, plaited up into a would-be fashionable chignon, was no longer a picturesque nor even a pleasing object to the eye.

A strong internal shudder came upon him as he contemplated her, and yet how was he to answer her? Did honour, indeed, demand that he should do as she said, and make reparation to her? Was she in very truth within her rights in demanding this much at his hands? And yet he knew well that to marry her would be a living death, that he would, in truth, sooner die than marry her. There are times in a man's life when the practical experiences of life are at odds with the precepts of morality, when in keeping to the wisdom of this world he does less actual harm than in striving to obey the somewhat shadowy injunctions that are impressed upon him by the revelations of the next. Probably the great and insoluble mystery of all this did not strike Dick Gaskell, but vaguely and incompletely he did feel that to marry Avise Colston would neither mend the past nor bring peace to the future; that to supplement a great evil by committing a great error is hardly the way to turn wrong into right, and that to drag himself down for the remainder of his existence by a low mar-

riage that would be odious to him, would neither be of benefit to himself nor yet of special advantage to the woman whom he would thus unwillingly make his wife. No, he would do everything on earth he could for Avice, but he would not make her his wife. Where he was wrong was that he had not the courage to tell her so. He dreaded a scene, and he wanted to get away quickly, and so, instead of being bravely open and honest with her, he shuffled and put her off. He could not possibly, he told her, marry her next week—he had business engagements that he was unable to postpone—perhaps the week after, or the week after that ; she must be patient and wait. That was all he dared to tell her. He did not let her know that he was a rich man, or the owner of a country estate, but allowed her still to imagine that he was poor and in debt, and that her father's few hundred pounds would be of infinite service to him. For, above all, now he wanted to get away from her in peace. So he kissed her and told her that he would soon come again and see her, if only she would be

patient, and then he pressed upon her finger a little twisted gold ring, which he had always worn, thinking that the gift would please her and keep her quiet and contented, and at last, with fresh promises, which he never meant to keep, he got himself away, leaving in Mrs. Mines' hands, when she opened the door for him, such a sum of money for the use of her lodger as very nearly took the good lady's breath away.

When he was well clear of Laburnam Road, Dick drew a long sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness that is over!" he said aloud to himself; "and I need never see her again. Now I will be true to myself and begin a new life in earnest, as soon as ever this week is over. I will write to Lord Harlowe, and confess that I have made a terrible mistake, and then I will ask Eve to be my wife."

For that was above all else what the meeting with Avice had taught him—he knew that he loved Eve.



Chapter the Fifth.

HOLLOWCROFT.

“ Better trust all and be deceived,
And weep that trust, and that deceiving;
Than doubt one heart that if believed,
Had blessed one's life with true believing.”

FRANCES ANNE KEMBLE.





CHAPTER V.

HOLLOWCROFT.

"Better trust all and be deceived,
And weep that trust, and that deceiving;
Than doubt one heart that if believed,
Had blessed one's life with true believing."

FRANCES ANNE KEMBLE.

IN after years Eve Latimer often looked back to these early January days as the happiest time of her life ; perhaps, indeed, she may have tasted of keener joys, or was destined to be filled with more of absolute rapture, but never again, surely, did the world seem to her to be so good a place, nor did summer sunshine or summer heavens ever smile so serenely upon her again as did the lowering grey winter skies of that January weather. For she believed in her lover ! Oh, blessed gift of trust and faith that is the natural heritage of every son and daughter of earth ! Is there one of us who has not

once tasted of that pure and uncorroded bliss, that sublime delight of an absolute belief in the creature we love best? That it is, and that alone, that renders love divine. Too soon, alas, comes the awakening, broken trust, and shattered illusions, and then, after that, the world "is never the same again," and our love, even if it endure, is shorn of its chiefest glory—doubts, fears, jealous forebodings, and all the bitterness of self-reviling—have crowded in through the rent veil of our "Holy of holies," so that it is a sanctuary and a shrine no longer, only a defenceless citadel at the mercy of every wind of heaven. When do we ever get back that lost peace of perfect faith? Alas, in this world, never—never more.

Eve Latimer's maiden soul had awakened to a knowledge of her love, and with the awakening came also an unbounded trust in the man she had learnt to love. She went about her daily life with such a glow of proud delight at her innermost heart as made her wonder how she had hitherto

existed without it. Only one thing troubled her—her guilty conscience with regard to her boys. It was terrible to her to have to bear about a secret, and such a secret, that must be hidden from those three beloved young sharers of her daily life. Ah, what would they say if they were to know it? She felt herself to be guilty of the grossest treachery towards them, in that she had learnt to love some one outside and beyond that inner circle of their fraternal love.

Every little detail of her life with them seemed to cut into her heart with self-reproach—their fond words of proud admiration, their rough caresses, their numberless little jokes—all the whole armoury of family chaff made her wince and shrink like a guilty creature.

“Oh, if they only knew!” she said to herself; and one of them at least did, perhaps, know or guess something of the truth.

Little Tom watched Eve narrowly; did she sit with dreamy eyes and a little happy smile on her face staring into the fire, she would

wake up from her happy trance to find Tom's eyes fixed sternly and suspiciously upon her; did she sing happily to herself about the house, Tom would inquire sarcastically whether she had heard any good news; or, did she by ill-luck refuse any dish at dinner, he would make the most cutting remarks about the probable causes of loss of appetite in young people, and the possible connection of this interesting symptom with certain romantic complaints popularly supposed to affect the heart. Oh, yes, little Tom knew very well, and he was sore and angry. He thought she ought to give him her confidence—he knew that Eve was not likely to talk to his brothers upon so delicate a subject, but he did think in virtue of his being her favourite, that she might, as he put it, “tell a fellow what was up,” and he resented her reticence accordingly. Yet, had he but known it, what was there for Eve to tell? Only a look, a hand-pressure, a murmur of her name, and once a whisper of that endearing word which is sufficient of itself to

turn a man and a woman into lovers. But that was sufficient for Eve. She did not know the world well enough to understand that a man will thus speak and thus look, and yet all the time mean nothing at all—it seemed to her that ten thousand words could not have told Dick's love to her so surely and so absolutely than these few intangible signs which she so fondly cherished—and if he loved her, well, that was enough for her. In his own good time he would tell her so, no doubt; and meanwhile he loved her, and she knew it, and was content to wait and to trust him for the rest.

In the second week of January South Meadowshire had been bidden to Hollowcroft Hall, and now that the brief days of decorous respect to the memory of the defunct George Gaskell were over, the world felt that the time was come for the traditional housewarming to be held in honour of the new lord of one of the finest old places in the county.

Hollowcroft, as its name denoted, lay in a gentle depression—a great grey stone house,

solemn and silent from its very size, encircled by belts of wood that closed it in on every side, within a centre of half-a-mile of circumference. Round the house were terraces of stone, and Italian gardens laid squarely out, with fountains and statues dotted about them at intervals, and in summer time, when the *parterre* of scarlet and yellow flowers was in full bloom, nobody could have termed it a gloomy house. But now, in January, with the bare garden beds, and the damp stone figures of nymphs and water gods presiding over them, and the leafless woods stretching away on every side, there is no doubt that a certain sombre and dignified melancholy reigns over the vast pile of grey stone as you come upon it from any one of the drives out of the woods and look down upon its square chimneys and long rows of mullioned windows. Hollowcroft, in fact, is one of those places that require to be filled from attic to cellar before it can properly do justice to itself.

This condition is amply fulfilled to-day.

It is five o'clock, and everybody is in after an excellent day's sport. The fox in the Hollowcroft coverts had, contrary to many gloomy forebodings been found, and found quickly, and had got away well. The line of country had been of the best, the going splendid, and the pace quite up to the usual mark, and all this in spite of the absence of the master, who had unaccountably failed to put in an appearance that day, having conveyed his regrets for his absence in a note sent over early to Mr. Gaskell's house, in which he pleaded "important business calling him up to London," as an excuse for his defection from the Hollowcroft festivities.

There had been no ugly falls and no accidents; everybody had come home in the best of tempers, and Mr. Gaskell's guests were now partaking of tea, and of other refreshments of a more potent nature, in the large oak-panelled entrance hall, hung with tapestry and armour and pictures, that was the chief feature of the old house. The ladies, some still in their habits, some in

tea-gowns of every shade and colour, sat grouped about the tea-table, which was set out in front of the fire—the men in their hunting gear stood about in groups discussing the day's run, the chances of sport for to-morrow, and the untoward absence of Fred Harlowe. Mrs. Clitheroe presided at the tea-table, the party from Cambray Castle not having yet arrived. A little apart from the others sat Eve—somewhat quiet and still, in a shadowy corner, the keen air had kissed her cheeks into a more brilliant rose, her eyes shone with a strange inward light, she held up her small hand between her face and the fire—her boys were scattered about amongst the guests, Gerald at Mrs. Clitheroe's elbow, where he looked somewhat sulky and out of spirits, although the fair Lucy made great capital out of the proper distribution of the cream and sugar, and said a great many pretty things to him under cover of the clatter of the cups and saucers, with little smiles and arch looks, and tender inflections, such as ought to have filled the soul of an

right-minded young man with joy and gratitude. Charlie was hard at work making himself agreeable to a couple of fair-haired merry-eyed sisters, who, with their mother, were staying in the house for the ball. Little Tom was seated on the billiard-table, swinging his legs irreverently to and fro, and descanting upon dogs to a group of interested young gentlemen of his own age and tastes. Eve amused herself in her quiet nook by listening to the little snatches of talk that came to her across the hum and buzz of general conversation—scraps of words from those three voices that were so dear to her, and that had a certain similarity of tone to each other.

From Gerald's corner.

"Left alone with Mr. Clitheroe is she? How nice for Miss Lamb!"

"Well, it must be better than nobody, you know; and Lamb couldn't expect to come!"

"Was she not asked?"

"Oh, yes; very kind of Mr. Gaskell, of

course; but how could I let her leave my precious ones at home?"

Then came a shout of laughter from Charlie's corner. "Green, trimmed with red and yellow, Miss Heywood! no really that will be too alarming! A cockatoo at the least!"

"I didn't say so, Mr. Latimer."

"Oh, yes, you did, really, or something very like it—you said she had red spots on a yellow——"

"No, yellow on mauve!" cried another.

"This gown changes colour every other minute!" laughed Charlie despairingly.

"And what you must do with the pups," here breaks in little Tom in the distance, "is to take 'em out as soon as ever they can go alone. I had a pup once that was as clever as a cartload of monkeys—I used to take him out with the ferrets and the older dogs regularly," &c., &c.

And all this time Dick was moving about as a host should do amongst his guests; but all at once, just when Eve was thinking least

about him, somebody slipped down by her side on the sofa.

“You went like a bird to-day,” said Dick’s voice at her elbow. “I never saw you go harder—it made my heart stand still when you took that big fence with the ditch towards you. You might have gone round, you know. I called out to you, but you were over half-way into the next field before I could stop you. Eve, for my sake, will you not be a little less bold and reckless?”

Her heart beat quickly with a sweet wild confusion. Ah! what would she not do “for his sake!”

But she only murmured almost inaudibly:

“I have never come to grief yet.”

“I know you are absolutely fearless, that is what terrifies me. Have you had some tea—you must be very tired.”

And just then, as he bent a little tenderly over her, and looked closely into the flushed drooping face, there came suddenly the sound of a heavy carriage drawing up to the door,

and the loud clang of the door-bell in the outer hall.

"Ah—h," he said pulling himself together with an effort. And there was something in the way he uttered that one exclamation that was almost a groan, so intense was the reaction of feeling that drew it forth.

He rose from Eve's sofa quickly.

The party from Cambray were just entering the house.

There was a general confusion of exchanged greetings—everybody of course rose to receive "royalty," as little Tom irreverently called them—everybody shook hands and asked meaningless questions, and made trite and foolish statements at once.

"How are you, dear Lady Harlowe?"

"Come over safely, I hope?"

"You must be very cold after your drive."

"Very raw and bleak, is it not?"

"And, dear Constance, how are you?" &c., &c., over and over again. The new comers gathered round the fire, and in the general confusion Eve escaped to her room.

Here, ten minutes later, little Tom came tumbling in, and flung himself down full length on the chintz-covered sofa at the bottom of her bed, stretching his arms up behind his graceless ruddy pate.

“Oh, you should have seen the old Mogul look over my head as if I’d been dirt!” he cried shaking all over with laughter; “it was as good as a play! I just said, ‘How d’ye do, my lord,’ putting up my finger so, to my forehead—I thought he’d like the free-and-easy style the best!”

“Oh, Tom, how naughty you are!”

“Oh, if you’d seen his face, you’d have shouted. It was enough to send a cat into convulsions—it was verdigris and vinegar set on edge and turned sour together—he only said, ‘Oh—ah—’ and made me a bow—fancy *me* getting a bow—and looked over the top of my head, you know, as if I was something too nasty even to be looked at. Oh, lord—oh, lord!”

“But, Tom, you ought to be better man-

nered! Surely you got down from the table and behaved properly?"

"Oh, I behaved as nice as ninepence to the ladies; the old girl shook hands quite gushingly with me, and Miss Harlowe smiled and seemed absolutely pleased to see me—it's only that pompous old fool who makes such an ass of himself. When he is civil to me, I'll be civil to him—that's fair and square, lord or no lord. Oh, I'd have given a fiver if you could have seen his face—Gerald did, and he nearly choked at the sight of it!"

"Tom, you wretch! do go and dress, and leave me to begin my operations. We shall be late, you know, and get into awful scrapes!"

"Not with Dick Gaskell, I'll be bound," said Tom, sitting up on the sofa and looking at her askance. "Is he very punctual and particular in his habits, Eve?"

"How should I know," she answered blushing hotly, knowing that little Tom was "drawing" her.

"Oh! I beg pardon, I thought you

knew," said Tom innocently and a little savagely. "You're so thick, you two—I saw him whispering away to you on the sofa in that dark corner."

"I believe you see everything!"

"Most things, Miss Latimer—Eve!" getting up suddenly and catching hold of her by both arms, so that she could not get away nor avoid his angry eyes. "Eve, if you go and get married, I suppose you know what a mean, shabby trick you'll be playing to us boys—didn't we settle we wouldn't! didn't we all swear to keep together! Oh, no, you needn't deny or look indignant! Don't you think you are going to hide it from me; you are just as spooney as two love-birds on each other, and what do you suppose all that spooning is going to end in? Oh, it's too bad—too bad!—and what is to become of me?" and with a sort of gulp that was suspiciously like a sob, little Tom flung himself wildly out of the room again, slamming the door angrily and noisily behind him.

There were no traces, however, of this

outburst of rage in Tom's face when he came back half-an-hour later to have his white tie tied for him. They all came in, for Dick, knowing their habits and customs, had put the Latimers all together in four adjacent rooms at the end of a long passage. Eve tied each man's tie and pinned in his button-hole a flower for him, and Tom's turn came last ; he looked at her with a comic penitence in his green eyes.

"You aren't angry, Eve, old chap?"

"I am—very angry," with her eyes fixed upon the gardenia she was pinning to his coat.

"Won't you forgive a fellow?"

"You must promise not to talk like that again, then. Besides—besides——" with a beating heart ; "it's—it's all fancy ; there's nothing—at all, not as you think, Tom."

"*Really?*" very eagerly. "What is there then?"

"Nothing—go away," she said pushing him away from her coldly.

Gerald and Charlie were shouting to him

along the passage, "Come on, Tom, the gong has gone and we are all late."

"I shall never be able to finish my dressing if you don't go," said Eve turning away to her dressing-table and clasping a string of pearls round her throat. But still Tom lingered.

"I am not going down without you," he said doggedly. "You are quite ready—here, let me clasp your bracelets, so—did that pinch you? I'm so sorry—and here are your gloves, and your fan—come along. Don't quarrel with me, Eve, Gerald and Charlie have gone on, and you and I will stick together, Eve, darling!" By this time they were running down the broad staircase hand-in-hand together like a couple of children. "Eve, darling, give me a kiss; do—we can always stick together and be pals, you and I, can't we?"

"Always, Tom, always," answered Eve, and she kissed him as he asked her.

Afterwards, how glad Eve was of that kiss, of those broken disjointed words, that, having

neither much sequence nor yet over much grammar about them, yet had the power to convey to her all the love of Tom's honest and devoted heart.

When the brother and sister came in together at the drawing-room door, they were instantly aware that something unusual was going on.

Although, undoubtedly, they were the very last—dinner apparently was not yet announced—and everybody stood or sat in attitudes of respectful attention; and it became instantly borne in upon Eve's astonished mind that Lord Harlowe was making a speech.

His lordship stood with his back to the fire, his coat-tails under his arms, everybody's eyes were fixed upon him. When the door burst somewhat abruptly open he stopped speaking, and frowned as Tom's ugly countenance came into view, transforming the frown, however, into a smile and a polite bow when he perceived Eve behind her brother. And then he waited very markedly

until the two offenders had sunk down into the nearest chairs.

“Ye powers!” whispered Tom. “What on earth is up? the old boy is making a speech—how savage Gaskell looks. No wonder! the soup will be cold and the fish be as shoe-leather.”

Eve looked at their host. He looked as Tom had said—savage. He stood by the corner of the mantelpiece looking down at his feet and gnawing impatiently at his moustache; a horrible and growing anxiety was upon him. He had no idea what Lord Harlowe was about to say, nor the remotest notion of the purport of the “few words” he had asked his permission to address at this singularly inappropriate moment to the eighteen hungry people who were all ready assembled for dinner. It was something about politics he supposed, the forthcoming election, no doubt, upon which the good old gentleman was about to descant; but why on earth couldn’t he have waited till after dinner, when the ladies had gone!

Lord Harlowe had already started his preamble when Eve and Tom entered—something in her presence filled Dick with a nameless apprehension. When a man has shadowy corners in his life's history, there is always a vague terror that some sudden flare of unwelcome light may be flung into them unexpectedly. Then came a pause, and, when the rustle of Eve's dress had subsided, Lord Harlowe faced his audience, gathered up his coat-tails anew, and lifted up his voice once more.



Chapter the Sixth.

LORD HARLOWE'S SPEECH.

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream."

"Julius Cæsar," SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER VI.

LORD HARLOWE'S SPEECH.

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream."

"Julius Cæsar," SHAKESPEARE.

"**AHEM**—as I was remarking, ladies and gentlemen—the few words I am about to address to you on this, I may say, auspicious occasion, strike me as—ahem—most appropriately to be spoken now, and as I see around me many old friends"—here came elaborate bows to the Dalrymples and Stottertons—"I feel sure that I shall have the warmest sympathy in what I am about to say, more especially as it intimately concerns the welfare of our kind host."

"Hear, hear, hear!" murmured everybody, and Lord Harlowe turned himself round for a moment towards Dick, who bowed and groaned internally.

Would this blundering and floundering speech ever be got on with? He thought of the soup, and he wondered if Lord Harlowe was going to ask him to stand for the county instead of Fred.

The old gentleman was in full swing again. Dick, nervous and anxious as he was, was only listening with half a ear, when suddenly every fibre of his being quickened into a horrible and intense realization of the words which were being spoken.

"It is with the greatest pleasure, ladies and gentlemen," proceeded his lordship, "that I take this semi-public occasion (if I may be allowed to use such a term) of announcing my consent and the consent of Lady Harlowe to an alliance which has been impending for some time, between my only daughter, Miss Harlowe, and our host, Mr. Richard Gaskell. I think that all present will wish happiness to the young couple, and that our host may now be asked to ring the bell for his, no doubt, excellent dinner, from which my few words have unduly detained you,

ladies and gentlemen, and thanking you again."

The worthy baron turned himself around with a benevolent smile, as one who has performed a great and a praiseworthy action, and his last words were lost in a chorus of exclamations and congratulations. Everybody rushed towards Constance, who was overcome with blushes, and was certainly as much surprised as was any one else at her father's announcement. The ladies smothered her with kisses, the gentlemen shook her by the hand. Nothing could be heard but broken words of astonishment and delight. It was a very jubilee—one would have thought that the personal happiness of every creature present was intimately connected with the interesting announcement that had just been made. Everybody seemed to be shaking hands with everybody else, and the voice of the butler at the door heralding the dinner, was pretty nearly drowned in the babel of tongues.

"For God's sake don't faint, Eve," whis-

pered little Tom at her elbow. "Pull yourself together, darling; you never funk'd a fence yet, you know; go at it straight—be a plucked one."

"All right."

Two minutes later Eve was standing with the rest in the group that had gathered about the happy Constance, and Dick heard the clear, sweet voice without a quaver or a tremble speak the few indispensable words of congratulation.

"I wish you every happiness, Miss Harlowe," said Eve firmly and brightly to her successful rival; "and I congratulate you heartily," and then, because everybody else did it, Eve kissed her. But to Dick Gaskell she said not one single word.

Meanwhile, Tom, like a mad thing, had flown upstairs to her room, and as Eve passed out through the long hall on the arm of the man who was escorting her in to dinner (afterwards she could never recollect who it was), little Tom was standing there as she went by, and smuggled her salts-bottle

surreptitiously into her hand before he fell back to bring up the rear of the long procession that wound its way into the dining-room.

What a dinner that was! Eve talked a great deal and laughed a great deal—more perhaps than she had ever done in her life before—but what she talked about she knew not, and what she laughed at she could not have told, and she ate nothing at all. There was a pink-coated sportsman to the right of her and another pink-coated sportsman to the left of her, and Eve was dimly conscious that she flirted wildly and desperately with both of them; that, contrary to her custom, she was gay almost to noisiness, and merry almost to excess. Old Mrs. Stotterton, who sat opposite to her, remarked to her neighbour, Colonel Slowcombe, that really those young Latimers were almost insufferably rowdy. “I always did think the girl was the best of them—she always seemed quiet and ladylike—but, upon my word, to-night she is outrageous!”

And there certainly was more noise and laughter going on about Eve's end of the table than elsewhere. She was dimly grateful that Dick was a long way off from her, and that a bush-like structure of flowers and ferns completely shut him out from her sight. Around the upper end of the table clustered the Harlowes and the Dalrymples and other magnates of Meadowshire, amongst whom the flow of conversation, although uninterrupted, proceeded calmly and decorously. Lower down Gerald and Mrs. Clitheroe whispered over the *entrées* and the jellies, whilst Charlie and Tom devoted themselves to a fair-haired Miss Heywood apiece.

Eve saw all, heard all, joined in all as in a dream. How it would have amused and pleased her a little while ago, a few short hours ago, in that far-away time when she was happy ! And now it seemed to her that she was Eve Latimer no longer, only a poor mad creature, with a wild, gnawing agony within, which she did not dare to think of, no, not for one instant of time, lest her forti-

tude should forsake her, and she should break down altogether. In incessant speech and incessant laughter seemed to lie her only safety.

Once, many years ago, Eve had been run away with in a dogcart, and the sensation she experienced now reminded her oddly of what she had felt on that occasion. She knew she must keep her nerve and her head—if she relaxed one single fibre of her being, gave up the fixed tension for one single second of time, then she knew it would be all over with her. Once or twice she caught Tom's eyes fixed upon her with a horrible pain of anxiety in them; the sight of his dear, white, ugly face and yearning green eyes gave her strength and restored her courage. She was even able to smile reassuringly to him across the table, as though to say:

“Don't be afraid, I am doing well,” she knew that he was suffering almost as much as she did, for her sake.

Then, after dinner, there was a terrible speech from Lord Dalrymple. If Eve could

only have put her fingers in her ears so as to help hearing it! But she could not do that; on the contrary, she had to look attentively towards the speaker, as did every one else, making believe to be interested and pleased with what he said.

Oh, how hard she tried to think of something else! But she could not.

It was all about married bliss and hymeneal joys, about the rapture of young lovers upon whom the world smiles its approval, and the particularly fortunate circumstances of the young man and maiden whose happy troth had been plighted together on this ever-to-be-remembered day. The speech was the essence of silliness, but Eve was obliged to listen to it.

The stupid commonplace unoriginal words struck one after the other into her very soul, cutting her through and through with a pain that was almost physical.

After dinner there came another period of torture whilst the ladies sipped their coffee in the drawing-room. The younger women

crowded about the bride-elect, who was flutteringly agitated almost to tears, being scarcely able, indeed, to realize her own wonderful and sudden happiness. The mothers, as was natural, pressed around Lady Harlowe. Eve caught scraps of their conversation as she sat by gulping down her scalding coffee.

“Such a wonderful surprise, dear Lady Harlowe; and I am sure must be a great delight to you to know that dear Constance’s future is so happily settled,” murmured one.

“And so suitable, too; age, disposition—everything so well matched—and a long attachment, too, I understand?” said another.

“Ah, yes, we all know that; it’s quite a little romance, is it not, dear Lady Harlowe?”

“Well, yes, it is really rather romantic,” admitted Lady Harlowe with a gratified smile. “He was much in love with her years ago, when, of course, it could not be thought of; and the dear fellow has really behaved very well coming forward again the very week after his return here. Oh, nothing could be

more prompt and devoted than his conduct! The only delay has been on our side; my husband felt a doubt as to how his affection had survived the separation of the last two years, and thought it wiser to wait a little; in fact, between you and I, dear Lady Dalrymple, Lord Harlowe threatened the poor young things with a year's probation! but they were both so utterly miserable that he was quite melted at last, and, now, I hope, all their troubles are over, and their long fidelity to each other will receive its reward at last."

And Eve heard all this. Every word of it! At last, after a delay that seemed to her an eternity, Lady Harlowe suggested a move upstairs in order to prepare for the ball, and the ladies all swept up the broad staircase behind her with much laughter and chatter, and dispersed into their different rooms.

Eve flung herself face downwards upon the couch at the foot of her bed. Her ball dress a mass of billowy white tulle and shining pearl-like spangles, lay in a heap upon the

bed behind her. She never even looked at it.

A sort of numbness was upon her—like all great blows, the shock of it had half-deadened her—she was not yet awake to the full extent of her anguish ; she *knew* that by-and-by she should suffer more ; that she was not yet alive to what this terrible revelation had brought to her. Loss of love, of hope—and, ah ! worst evil of all, loss of her trust and belief in mankind. For that, after all, is the worst thing that a man does for a woman when he treats her badly. From the wound to her heart she will recover, from the destruction to her life's desires she will yet build up for herself, in time, some other career, but for the destruction of her faith and belief in man there is no cure under the sun—it tarnishes the brightness of her soul, and spoils the sweetness of her character for ever.

Eve never knew how long she lay there prone, with her white face buried in her hands, thankful only for the solitude which enabled

her to be physically still, for the cessation of that fearful strain upon her nerves which for the last two hours had forced her to talk, and to laugh, and to do as others were doing.

She did not weep, she did not moan ; only she lay there absolutely still. What aroused her was little Tom's arms around her, and his dear ugly face pressed lovingly against hers.

"There's my own dear brave girl ! Eve, darling, rouse yourself and begin to dress ; you must come down, you know."

"Oh, Tom ! *must* I ? Can't I say I'm ill, and stay up here ?" she groaned miserably, twisting herself up upon her sofa.

"What, and let everybody guess ? You don't want to do that, do you ? No, dear, you must come down to-night, if only for a bit. You must show a brave front to the world, and pretend that you don't care—just for to-night—to-morrow——" and little Tom's brow grew very black and angry. "Well, to-morrow it will be my affair—mine and Gerald's and Charlie's."

"What do you mean, Tom?" Her heart stood still, and a wild, startled look came into her eyes.

"What I mean is this," said little Tom slowly and deliberately; "that for to-night we are bound to stay here under this man's roof; we can't help ourselves; we can do nothing, and the place is full of women; but, to-morrow morning, your brothers will take the insult to their sister upon their own shoulders, and the three of us together will horsewhip this cowardly scoundrel who has dared to play fast-and-loose with our sister's heart, before we turn our backs upon his accursed house for ever."

"Tom, how dare you—how dare you speak of him so," cried Eve springing to her feet—her eyes were ablaze, all her soul was in arms in defence of the man she loved. "You—you wretched boys to speak of horsewhipping such a man as Mr. Gaskell, who is everything that is good and honourable."

"But, Eve, surely he has made love to you; he has led you to believe——"

"He has ~~made no~~ love to me," cried Eve **stoutly**; "never by word or deed! He has led me to believe nothing, ever—save that he is, as he always will be, one of the best of my friends."

Oh, we hear a great deal about the virtue and the beauty of truth; but what truth is so intrinsically noble and so self-devoted as that lie which a woman in the abnegation of her self-sacrifice will boldly tell to save the name and the honour of the man she loves! Whatever might be her own sufferings, however her heart might bleed from the cruel blow which Dick had dealt to her, Eve would have died sooner than permit one word of blame to be cast at him.

Tom looked at her with a mixture of admiration and of anger.

"By Jove, she *is* a good plucked 'un," he muttered below his breath, and yet he was angry with her, for he knew that Eve had told him a lie to save Dick's name, and it was maddening to think how much she *must* love this man who was treating her so badly.

Brothers do not mince their words when they are angry with their sisters. Little Tom spoke to Eve out of the bitterness of his sorrow and regret for her, and his words were no longer loving or pitiful.

“Oh, then, I have wasted my sympathy! You have allowed yourself to get spooney on a chap who didn't trouble himself about you, and whom I told you long ago was supposed to be after Miss Harlowe? A pretty position, Miss Latimer! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Fancy being spoons on a man who don't care for you!”

She bowed her head meekly. His words were cruel and hard; but Eve knew that little Tom did not mean what he said, and that his heart ached for her.

“Decidedly; then you had better dress and get down as quickly as you can—you can at least save the family credit by not howling aloud over your blighted affections.”

“Tom, you are very unjust,” she murmured in a low voice, turning away from him to her dressing-table, and then Tom's heart

melted within him. He knew that she had behaved splendidly through dinner ; he knew that she was brave and fearless, and that no cowardice of hers would ever throw disgrace upon herself or upon her brothers.

He came up timidly behind her—the two faces, so like and so unlike, were reflected together side by side in the mirror—Eve's, fixed and white, with pain-lines across her aching brow and steady tearless eyes that would surely never flinch or falter ; Tom's, uncertain and anxious, with penitence in his yearning eyes and utter misery in every feature—he laid his hand timidly on her arm.

“ We have always got each other, Eve ? ” he said softly.

“ Always, darling boy ; thank God—thank God ! ” she answered him back quickly, with the first and only sign she had yet given of a break in her voice. “ *Don't—don't* be kind, little Tom ! I—had rather—you were rough.”

“ I'll tell you what, Eve,” said Tom with a gulp, “ don't you ring for a stupid gaping maid ; I shall be next door, you know, and you

just tap on the wall when you are ready, and I'll come and lace up **your** frock for you."

The notion of Tom's lacing her ball dress was too much for Eve.

There is no crisis of our lives, too awful for the comic side of life to be utterly extinguished in us.

"Oh, Tom, and you can't even tie your own white tie!" she cried, and then she sank down on the edge of the sofa and burst out laughing.

And her laughter was more terrible to little Tom than would have been floods of her tears.

"Don't darling, don't," he said soothing and caressing her as if in very truth she had been weeping. "You'll have hysterics, you know, and that would be awful."

"Fancy me in hysterics!" she pulled herself together with an effort. "Now go, for I must dress; I shall be all right. Only, Tom," calling him back again as he was leaving the room, "never one word against *him*, remember! and don't tell Gerald and Charlie."



Chapter the Seventh.

HOW GERALD LOOKED FOR A BRACELET.

“ If we do meet again, why we shall smile ;
If not, why then this parting was well made.”

“ Julius Cæsar,” SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER VII.

HOW GERALD LOOKED FOR A BRACELET.

"If we do meet again, why we shall smile;
If not, why then this parting was well made."

"Julius Cæsar," SHAKESPEARE.

GERALD was too much taken up with his own troubles to be conscious of his sister's, on the night of the Hollowcroft ball. It did not, indeed, occur to him, that Eve was in any trouble at all. He was, perhaps, not gifted with a great amount of sensitiveness concerning her. It was the creed of the Latimer boys generally, that Eve was, like the French chevalier of old, *sans peur et sans reproche*. And with Gerald and Charlie, at least, it was an article of faith that their sister could have no history independent of her home life—no disturbing influences beyond the management of her household and her unruly family. It was given to little Tom alone to divine with.

an instinct, sharpened, possibly, by keener affection, that Eve was no unapproachable goddess upon a pedestal, but a maiden, much as other mortal maidens, who could love and be wooed, and suffer pain and disappointment about things and persons with which "Misrule" had nothing whatever to do.

Gerald, moreover, was in these days a very miserable and dissatisfied young man. He was absorbingly in love with a woman who would have nothing to say to him, and whom he hardly ever saw, save in the presence of another woman who claimed his attention and devotion in a fashion which was beginning to be odious to him. He had begun by making a cat's-paw of Mrs. Clitheroe, and she had ended by making a cat's-paw of him.

He was heartily sick of her—sick of her silly little speeches, of her incessant self-consciousness, her sham sentimentality—he was tired of dangling after her in public, and ashamed of being eternally told off to take her in to dinner, as though he could not be happy away from her. He would gladly have

broken loose from these irritating silken chains, which his own folly, and Lucy's vanity, had woven about him, and have shaken himself free from a position which had now ceased to amuse him, and only retained the power to gall and torment him. And yet he did not dare so to shake off Mrs. Clitheroe, because, through her, and through her favour and good graces alone, could he hope to gain an occasional glimpse of the woman he loved. Were he to wound Mrs. Clitheroe's vanity, then Mrs. Clitheroe would quarrel with him and cease to invite him to her house, in which case, good-bye to his chances of seeing Edith Lamb.

When he got into the ball-room at Hollowcroft he was instantly aware that Lucy was making signs to him to come to her across the room. He worked his way with difficulty through the fast-thickening crowd, stopping, as often as he could make a decent excuse of doing so, on the way, to exchange greetings with his friends and acquaintances. It took him three or four minutes to accomplish the

enrolment of his name on Miss Anna Heywood's dancing-card, so dense was the crowd of scarlet and black coats about that fortunate young lady, and so clamorous the requests for her waltzes and polkas. Then Mrs. Trimmer tapped him on the arm with her fan, and he made another long delay to reply to her bantering remarks. Captain Spicer, too, contrived to buttonhole him in order to confide to him, in a terrified whisper, that "the glass, by Jove, was going up like blazes," and that he had just put his nose out of doors, and had seen those confounded stars, and felt a decided sharpness in the air.

"It's the third day the glass has been going up. Mark my words, Latimer, we shall have a frost!" And the little man's long face, as he uttered this dire prophecy, might have led the uninitiated to imagine that it was, at least, a national calamity which he was foretelling. The next stoppage in Gerald's career was the group about his own sister. It went through his mind, as he passed her with a smile and a little flattering word concerning her pretty

dress, that he had never seen her look so lovely and so beaming. He half paused, indeed, for the pleasure and pride of seeing her whirled away into the crowd of dancers. "She is the best-looking girl in the room," he murmured to himself proudly. "Even Miss Heywood can't hold a candle to her."

And then at last he found himself by Mrs. Clitheroe's side.

"I thought you were never going to get here," she said with a little pout. "And I have been keeping the first waltz for you. What made you so long?"

"I was admiring my sister."

"Your sister! Oh! I think it is that Heywood girl you looked at the most."

"Very likely. She is exceedingly pretty. Shall we dance?"

He was cross and disinclined to carry on the bantering flirtation as usual.

"Don't be disagreeable, Gerald," she whispered in his ear as they floated round together. "I know I am a silly jealous little woman."

"Who are you jealous about?" he inquired coldly, almost savagely. "Has your husband fallen a victim to Miss Heywood's charms?"

"You know I am not thinking about James," she answered angrily. "Is it likely I should trouble myself about him when he neglects me so shamefully? You, of all people, ought to know how unhappy I am in my domestic life. He always leaves me to come out alone; never gives me the comfort of his presence, of his protection in public."

"Well, he is going to turn over a new leaf and protect you to-night. See, there he is, in the doorway!"

Lucy gave a little cry of dismay.

"Oh——!" she said, and suddenly stopped dancing. "You don't really mean it! Where!"

There, sure enough, was her rough-looking, black-bearded husband, just coming in at the door. Mrs. Clitheroe looked so intensely disgusted, that Gerald could not help laughing.

"What on earth induced him to come?" cried poor Lucy. "I made so sure he'd be

quite happy flirting with Lamb, and then have his pipe and go to bed ! Now all my pleasure is spoilt."

"Well, you ought at least to be glad to see that he doesn't neglect you," said Gerald feeling more vicious towards her than he had ever done before. "Perhaps Miss Lamb did not want him any more than you seem to do. Poor Clitheroe ! I really feel quite sorry for him."

Unaccountably, Gerald's spirits had gone up. Never had that ugly and uncouth apparition seemed so agreeable and pleasant in his eyes. To see him here, visibly in the flesh, was an unspeakable relief to him.

"There is only one reason I can possibly imagine that can have brought James," Mrs. Clitheroe was saying. "I left my new diamond bracelet behind me, the one he gave me at Christmas. James loves to see me decked up in diamonds. How stupid it was of me to forget it. He is quite capable of having come on purpose to bring it ! Well, James," as the unwelcome husband

elbowed his way through the crowd towards them; "so you have come after all! What made you change your mind?"

"It was slow at home. I thought I'd come and look you up. Hope you are enjoying yourself?"

"You haven't brought me my bracelet by any chance?—the new one you gave me the other day?"

"No. You don't mean to say you have lost it, Lucy?"

"Oh, no. I only left it behind on my dressing-table. I was in such a hurry when I was starting. I meant to stuff it into my dressing-bag, but I forgot to do so."

"How stupid of you. What's the use of my giving you handsome things if you forget to wear them."

"Perhaps, dear, you would like to go back and fetch it now?" said Lucy smiling very sweetly up at him.

But Mr. Clitheroe did not seem to see the beauty of this suggestion at all.

And at this juncture there entered into

Gerald Latimer's mind a most delightful and exciting little scheme. Lucy, as they moved away from her husband, whispered to him.

"Isn't he a selfish brute?"

"All men are, I am told," murmured Gerald back.

"All *husbands*, you mean," corrected Lucy.

"Well, I am not a husband! Don't say a word. I am going to get your bracelet for you."

"*You*, Gerald! Oh, but I won't hear of such a thing! I can't let you take so much trouble for me!"

"I am going all the same. Will your maid know where it is?"

"The housemaid will; my maid is here, you know. But, really and truly, Gerald, I cannot let you go all that way."

"Pooh! what is two miles. I shall be back before our next dance. Good-bye, the sooner I am off, the sooner I shall be back."

"Oh, you really are a dear boy!" And perhaps, in the face of such an unparalleled piece of devotion poor silly little Lucy Clitheroe may be pardoned for believing

herself to be an object of wild and hopeless passion to Gerald Latimer.

Naughty Gerald went his way chuckling over his own iniquities. Whilst he was putting on his great-coat, by the hall door, a friend asked him what he was doing.

"I'm just going out to have a look at the weather. Spicer swears it's freezing," answered Gerald.

"You mean have a smoke on the quiet, I expect!"

"That's about it, my boy! Don't tell of me."

"I only wish I could be with you; but I've got to polish off Miss somebody or other in a red dress. You stay on the terrace and I'll join you as soon as the dance is over."

"All right," replied Gerald, and taking a last backward glance at the gay scene he was leaving, at the gyrating couples of men and maidens, the floating gossamer dresses, the scarlet and black coats of the men, the lights and the flowers, he slipped out of the front door of the house and found himself alone in the night. Needless, perhaps, to say that

his friend sought for him in vain a quarter-of-an-hour later on the terrace walks of the Italian garden.

Captain Spicer had been perfectly correct in his prognostics concerning the weather. It was very decidedly freezing. The sky was cloudless and star bespangled, the air was keen and crisp, the roads were already hard and dry ; this latter to Gerald, in his thin shoes, was a real consideration. He walked along rapidly, with a light heart and an intense realization of delight in what he was doing. Two miles had surely never been more quickly encompassed.

In a marvellously short time Gerald was ringing loudly at the bell at the front door of Mrs. Clitheroe's house.

A somewhat startled man-servant answered to his appeal.

"I have come to fetch something Mrs. Clitheroe has left behind her——"

"Oh! I beg pardon, sir, I did not see it was you; pray walk in," and the door was flung open to admit him.

"It is a bracelet which Mrs. Clitheroe forgot to take. She thinks Miss Lamb knows where it is. Has Miss Lamb gone to bed?" he added, quaking internally, for this was a contingency he was fully prepared for, and if she had gone to bed, nothing that he could do or say would, he believed, be strong enough to induce her to get up again to see him.

"I am sure I couldn't say, sir; but I will inquire," and just then a maid-servant passed up the stairs. "Has Miss Lamb gone to bed, do you know, Eliza?"

"She had not five minutes ago; she was in the schoolroom. I think there is a light there still," was the reply.

Up went Gerald's heart again.

"Oh, thanks, then I will find her there, and give her Mrs. Clitheroe's message. You need not come, I can find my own way."

Edith was kneeling on the floor, in the children's schoolroom, before an open black box. There could be no sort of doubt as to what was her occupation. She was packing

up. There were piles of books and of music about her on the floor—her desk, her work-basket, her drawing materials. Everything was going, one after the other, into the trunk. She looked tired and very worried, and was paler than usual.

Suddenly the door opened, and to her intense surprise Gerald Latimer entered.

She rose hurriedly to her feet.

“Has anything happened — has Mrs. Clitheroe come home?”

He laughed a little bitterly, closing the door carefully behind him. “Can I never, then, appear anywhere without being expected to have the fair Lucy at my heels? Mrs. Clitheroe is not here, Miss Lamb”

“But—but—are you not at the Hollowcroft ball?” she faltered.

“Apparently not—since I am here!”

“What brings you?” she said slowly, looking anxious and puzzled.

“You. *You* bring me, Edith!” he cried laughing happily. “Don’t you think it was a good thought that I found an excuse to get

away to you, when I knew that you were all alone?" And then as he came nearer to her, reaching his hand out to take hers, suddenly his eyes fell upon the open box on the floor, and his foot stumbled against the heaps of books and music upon the floor.

"Good heavens! What is the meaning of this?" he cried with a sudden fear at his heart.

"What are you doing?"

"I am packing up," she replied calmly.

"Packing up?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes, because I am going to leave this house to-morrow morning; the moment, in fact, that Mrs. Clitheroe returns."

"But Mrs. Clitheroe——"

"Mrs. Clitheroe knows nothing of my intention; but," she added meaningly, "I think Mr. Clitheroe does."

"For heaven's sake tell me what you mean. Has that brute——"

"That brute *has*," she answered laughing a little. "Don't look so horribly, murderously savage, Mr. Latimer! The man has insulted

me this evening, and I shall leave this house to-morrow."

"What has the infernal scoundrel said to you," gasped Gerald wildly?

"Oh, never mind that; I took very good care of myself, and you are not my champion, you know."

"Oh, if you would only let me be! Edith, it maddens me to think that you have no one to stand by you to protect you against the insolence of such brutes as that——"

"No woman on earth is better fitted to fight her own battles than I am. I have to, you know." But she smiled at him as she spoke and let him take her hand.

"Where are you going?"

"Ah, that is my affair."

"Do you mean to say that you won't tell me—won't give me your address?" he cried in dismay.

She nodded her head. "That is what I do mean," she said gently. "Don't you see that it is better for you, Gerald?"

"For me only?"

"Well, for me also, if you will have me say it," she added with a slight flush. "It is better for us both to part entirely and for ever. Once you can make up your mind that it must be so—once I have gone out of your existence for ever—then you will soon learn to forget me."

"I will never forget you," he cried passionately. "Never, as long as I am alive—and I will find you—you think you will hide yourself from me, but there is no corner on the wide earth that shall conceal you from me. Oh, do you not see that this is no child's play to me—that I am in earnest—terribly in earnest. Edith, I *know* that you love me; deny it if you can."

"I do not deny it," she said throwing back her head proudly, and looking at him straightly and bravely with a sudden fire in her deep sombre eyes; "I do love you, Gerald, dearly and truly, and it is because I love you that I tell you again that I will never marry you. Cannot you take 'No'?"

"I will never take it now—or ever!" he

cried, holding her hand tightly in his own.

"Obstinate boy!" she whispered with a smile—for she loved him in his obstinacy.

"Will you not give me one hope?" he pleaded.

"Yes," she said after a pause. "Just this—if ever you find me where I am going to-morrow, and if you ask me to marry you—then—well, then, I will."

"Oh, Edith!" He pressed the hands he held with passionate fervour to his lips. "God bless you, dear, for saying that."

"Ah, do not be too grateful," she said half laughing, "because, to begin with, you never will find me; and to go on with, if you do, you never will wish to marry me."

"That is my look-out."

"And now go. Good-bye, dear Gerald, and may God bless you."

Then, for once, did she yield to the sweetness of his love. She laid her head down upon his shoulder and let him kiss her as he liked. To him, it was the gladness of a

triumph, to her, it was as an eternal farewell.

“Now go,” she whispered once more, this time very sadly and brokenly.

And he went. But when he had got back to Hollowcroft he found that he had utterly forgotten the diamond bracelet !



Chapter the Eighth.

FRED HARLOWE TAKES SEVERAL
JOURNEYS.

"Nothing's so hard but search will find it out."

HERRICK.





CHAPTER VIII.

FRED HARLOWE TAKES SEVERAL JOURNEYS.

"Nothing's so hard but search will find it out."

HERRICK.

"MY DEAR NEPHEW,—I am writing to tell you that I seized the opportunity of the gathering at Hollowcroft Hall to make, last night, a public announcement of Constance's engagement to Mr. Richard Gaskell. I am glad that you took my hint and absented yourself from the festivities. I am sure you will give me credit for a very sincere regret that things have turned out so unsatisfactorily for you; at the same time, you will understand that I was bound to consider my child's happiness before all. The wedding will take place some time early in March. No doubt you will by then have sufficiently recovered from your natural disappointment to take your place

amongst us. Here, we are with three degrees of frost, so you can safely stay away a few days longer.

“Your affectionate uncle,

“HARLOWE.”

Fred Harlowe stood warming his toes at the fire in the coffee-room at his hotel in Dover Street, reading the above letter from his uncle. He looked very gloomy and angry as he read it, and when he had finished it he tore it into very small fragments, and stooped down and thrust them all together into the blaze of the flames. Then he turned round, and sat down to the breakfast which was waiting for him at the little round table behind him. All the time he was eating his ham and eggs he was frowning angrily to himself.

The Harlowe tenacity was all awake in him. The more circumstances were against him the more determined he became to override and conquer them. He had not given up Constance in the very least ; he was, on the

contrary, more set upon winning her than ever. He did not consider his cause lost because her engagement to Gaskell was given out. He only knew that it behoved him to redouble his efforts to bring that engagement to naught. Already he had not wasted his one day in town—he had gone about making inquiries concerning Dick's past life in London—and he had learnt—what might probably be told of nine out of ten idle young men thrown upon their own resources in town—that he had been dissipated and reckless, spending his money right and left, playing higher than he had any right to do, and going, in short, along the shortest road to ruin that was possible to him. Then the pace had become too hot to be kept up, and Dick had been forced to leave town hurriedly, and for six months nobody knew what had become of him or where he had hidden himself. Now it was these inexplicable six months in his rival's career that Fred Harlowe was determined to get to the bottom of. Hitherto, although nothing very creditable to Dick had

transpired, there was still nothing tangible against him. He would probably own himself that he had been extravagant and wild, and both Constance and her parents would be ready to overlook all shortcomings of so vague a nature in his past career. No, it needed something blacker and wickeder still for him to bring triumphantly forward as a substantial evidence against him. Mr. Harlowe remembered his trump card, and as he sat over his breakfast he took his letter-case from his pocket, and smoothed out a little crumpled bit of printed paper that was safely secured in its inner pocket.

“‘Crowbay. Avice is ill. Come to her at once, to Laburnam Road.’”

He read it over and over again, pondering deeply over it. He did not know where Laburnam Road might be. He had no idea in what corner of the British Isles Crowbay was to be found.

He was, however, certain that it would be necessary for him to find out both these places, and to visit them himself. The ques-

tion was, which should he attack first? By the time he had swallowed his breakfast Mr. Harlowe had decided this knotty point. He would begin at the beginning, and go to Crowbay. He got up, walked to the window, congratulated himself, for the first time in his life, upon the fact of there being a hard frost, so that he could be easily spared from South Meadowshire. Then he sent for a Bradshaw and an A B C, and began to consider the subject of Crowbay. He discovered that there were two Crowbays—one in Yorkshire and one in Essex. As he was quite unaware that the Crowbay which he sought was ten miles from any railway, he decided to go to both these places; and he did, in fact, waste two whole days in fruitless expeditions to them both.

He came back on the third morning to his hotel in Dover Street, much fatigued in body, but quite undaunted in mind; and, then, cursing himself for a fool for not having done so before, he got a Post Office Guide, and discovered what he sought for—a village,

ten miles from Exeter, of the name of Crowbay.

It was on a cold and miserable afternoon, with a fine snowstorm blowing from the north, and lodging like white dust in every corner and cranny, that Fred Harlowe drew his cramped and chilled limbs out of the inside of the Exeter coach and alighted in front of the "Green Man and Dragon," in the village of Crowbay. Here he began to prosecute his inquiries, and found no great difficulty in ascertaining all that he wanted to know. There was not a man, woman, or child in the whole of Crowbay who did not know all about the gentleman who had lodged at "Mr. Colston's," at Seaview Villa, all last summer. Everybody was familiar with his handsome face, every one had seen his tall figure wandering on the sands, or watched him day after day as he put out to sea in the brown-sailed fishing smack. The landlord of the "Green Man" was garrulous when Mr. Harlowe pressed home his inquiries concerning the Mr. Colston where Mr. Gaskell had lodged,

good man was not slow in affording him every information that he desired.

Ah! it was a sad story he told him, shaking his head, and Seaview Villa was a desolate place now; the young gentleman as used to be so sweet. on Avice Colston went away; but then one fine day old Stephen Colston had appeared, and his boat had gone, too; so that folks thought he had sailed out one morning when there was a very heavy sea on, and that the boat had been swamped.

‘And Avice, too, has gone away, nobody can tell where, some say as she went out to sea with her father, and was drowned, too; but others do say as how she was seen on the Exeter Road, and went off to London to find her gentleman lover; leastways she had never come back again; and the maid-servant, she had put up the shutters in the villa, and gone back to her mother, short of a month’s wages. And the lawyer in Exeter, as had all old Stephen’s money, was driven distracted at trying to find him; and had advertised for him all over the county. Ah, a bad business, sir!

a bad business ; but most do think as Avice was married on the quiet, in Exeter, to Mr. Gaskell, and that they are living somewhere in London together."

When he had listened to this story, Fred Harlowe took a walk by himself along the bay. The grey sea moaned dismally to the left of him ; the white cottages, shorn of their flowers and their setting of greenery, looked melancholy and woe-begone. When he came to Seaview Villa he had no difficulty in recognizing it from his friend, the landlord's description. The garden was sodden and bare ; the outer shutters were fastened up ; the kitchen window, where Avice used to busy herself amongst her pots and pans, singing over her work, was barred up, and no fireglow lit up the impenetrable gloom within. It was a deserted house. Fred Harlowe shivered to himself over the desolation of the scene, and went back to the inn. Having learnt all he could in the dreary little fishing village, he took himself gladly back to Exeter, where he shortly presented himself in the office of Messrs. Snale

and Grale, Solicitors, High Street. Here he learnt something quite new and absolutely delightful. Mr. Grale, the junior partner in the firm, with whom his interview took place, informed him that Stephen Colston, about whose fate they were exceedingly anxious, had visited them a few days previously to his disappearance, and had empowered them to draw up his daughter's marriage settlements; and that this document was actually in existence and waiting to be signed. Mr. Grale, who was certainly more communicative than a solicitor has any business to be, was quite amenable to the soothing influence of a five-pound note, which Fred Harlowe carefully smoothed out on the table before him, and which, somehow, transferred itself, ere long, to the vicinity of the gentleman who sat opposite to him. Under the benign effects of this *douceur*, Mr. Grale became very confidential indeed. Mr. Colston, he told him, had saved a tidy bit of money, which it had been his purpose to settle upon his daughter, subject to a deduction of two hundred pounds, with

which he proposed to pay the debts of his future son-in-law. A will had also been drawn up to the same effect, which Stephen had actually signed on the day of his last visit.

“And all these three persons have disappeared, you say, Mr. Grale?”

“Totally vanished, sir! It’s the most embarrassing thing for us, as you may imagine.”

“Do you believe then, that both Colston and his daughter, Avice—Avice I think you said—have been drowned?”

Here Mr. Grale laid a fat, red forefinger against the side of his nose, and winked.

“Not the girl, sir, not the girl! Girls ain’t so easily got rid of; that girl’s gone to London to join the gentleman, or my name’s not Solomon Grale.”

“Could she not be traced?”

Mr. Grale shrugged his shoulders. “No doubt, if it were worth any one’s while to go to the expense, but who is there to care about it?” and he screwed up one eye, and looked cunningly across the table at his visitor. As Mr. Harlowe studied his nails,

and made no rejoinder, Mr. Grale proceeded :

“ You see how it is, old Colston’s drowned sure enough, he’ll never be heard of again ; the settlements being unsigned are so much waste-paper, even in the event of the marriage having taken place ; the only thing that concerns *us*, sir, is the will. We are doing our duty, advertising in every direction, in order to find the daughter ; she’ll turn up in time ; the probabilities are that she was married on the quiet, and being unaware of her father’s intentions with regard to her, is keeping dark somewhere. She’ll turn up again some of these days, I make no doubt.”

“ And—the name of this gentleman, Mr. Grale, to whom the girl was to be married ? ”

Mr. Grale was silent for a few seconds.

“ You are probably, sir, a relation of his ? ” he hazarded at length.

Fred Harlowe smiled an inscrutable smile, and pursed up his lips, as though he could say a good deal if he chose. Then, as Mr.

Grale continued silent, he took out his pocket-book, and began toying absently with sundry crisp fluttering substances within one of its inner pockets. Mr. Grale's face became suddenly bathed in a warm and genial effulgence, and gratitude for past favours and hopes of future benefits loosened all of a sudden the string of his tongue.

"His name, sir, was Richard Gaskell."

"Ah—h!" Mr. Harlowe rose to his feet, put back his pocket-book in his breast-coat pocket, buttoned up his coat, somewhat to Mr. Grale's dismay, and took his leave. He had learnt all he desired to know.

All the way back to London he reflected joyfully on the success of his expedition. There was no sort of doubt in his mind that Dick was either actually married to this girl from Crowbay, or else so seriously compromised that he had no longer any right to engage himself to another woman; least of all, to such a woman as Lord Harlowe's only daughter.

Fred knew well with what horror his uncle would regard the story, which it was his purpose to reveal to him. He understood Lord Harlowe's high sense of honour, his scrupulous regard for absolute whiteness and purity of life, his deep horror of anything approaching to deceit or concealment; and he could not doubt that the story of Dick's unlucky proceedings upon the Devonshire coast would absolutely destroy his chances of becoming Constance's husband.

Lord Harlowe, Fred well knew, had an almost exaggerated horror of anything approaching to a low alliance; that a gentleman should so much even as flirt with a fisherman's daughter, and then dare to aspire to the hand of the Hon. Constance Harlowe, would fill him with absolute disgust and with unbounded indignation.

But although success had certainly hitherto rewarded his endeavours, Mr. Harlowe did not consider yet that he had sufficiently made good his case—the mine must be well prepared before he could venture to spring it

upon his victim with sufficient certainty. The next thing to be done was to find Avice Colston herself. He thought of Mr. Grale's hints, and was glad he had not availed himself of that gentleman's assistance in the matter. He did not desire to make his story too public, or to drag Constance's name into the police reports. Grale was too evidently a low, unprincipled fellow, amenable to bribes and capable of betraying the secrets of his clients. He had no desire to confide any of his family difficulties to such a man as this. Neither, for much the same reasons, did he intend to employ professional aid in his researches. Mr. Harlowe was, by this time, somewhat elated with his successes and pleased with himself for his own cleverness; and he determined to be his own detective and find Avice Colston in Laburnam Road, alone and unaided.

So he returned to London, and for the space of one whole week he perambulated the suburbs of London in vain. For that which is clear as the noon-day in a village or a

country town, is often shrouded in impenetrable mystery in the vast area of the metropolis and its environs. To look for a woman whom one has never seen, in a street whose whereabouts one is in ignorance of—in a house whose number is unknown to one, is a task of herculean proportions. And though Fred Harlowe actually walked more than once up and down that very Laburnam Road, Notting Hill, where Avice Colston lodged, he was no nearer his object at the end of these perambulations than he was before them. Once, indeed, he actually stopped a neat-looking young woman, whom he saw issuing from one of the small mean-looking houses. And making some excuse for addressing her, asked her if she had not a pretty christian name “something like Avice, eh?” said Fred, putting his head on one side and trying to look fascinating. But Fred Harlowe was an ugly man, and his youth was already behind him; and these pleasantries sat awkwardly and ungracefully upon him.

The young woman was virtuously indignant

at his presuming to address her. She told him soundly that she would have "none of his imperance"—adding scoffingly and insultingly that "an ugly old man like him ought to be ashamed of himself!" And then she fled swiftly along, and left him planted there upon the pavement.



Chapter the Ninth.

THE "MEADOWSHIRE MERCURY."

"My friends were poor but honest."

SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER IX.

THE "MEADOWSHIRE MERCURY."

"My friends were poor but honest."

SHAKESPEARE.

"VONE—too—dree—fore—ah, my God, what a curtesy! and your shoulders, Mees Stubbs, up to your very ears; turn out your veet, Mees Jenkins. Ah, vat would that beautiful aristocratic creature, Lady Angeline Vernon, who vòs vonce my most cherished pupil, say, if she could see your veet?"

(What indeed!)

"Ah, Mr. Smeeth, is dat de way to take a young lady round de vaist! Ah, my God, mind de time! Listen to de music!"

The dancing class in the alley at the back of Laburnam Road was in full swing. "Monsieur l'Agneau" alias Lamb, was screaming himself hoarse. Three thick-waisted young women, and one red handed, raw-boned youth,

represented "the class." They hobbled about awkwardly and ungracefully over the polished floor. And a tall woman, with her back to the room, sat at the piano, patiently strumming a waltz tune. It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening—a long passage led from the dancing-room out into the alley; the outer door was open, and above it swung an illuminated glass lamp on which, in large red letters, was written, "Monsieur Guillaume l'Agneau, Professor of dancing and deportment to the aristocracy and gentry. Classes every evening from seven till nine, open to both ladies and gentlemen; admittance, 2s. 6d."

Every now and then poor Monsieur l'Agneau, looking very hot and tired, would peer out along the passage from the dancing room to see whether any more recruits were coming in; then he would sigh heavily, pull up his dirty white gloves again, and go back to his sham French accent and his weariful instruction. Four pupils at two-and-sixpence apiece a night, although often there were three times as many, did not make a very

paying concern of "The Class." Until just lately, too, a third of the profits had to go to the musician; but now that expense was saved to him, for it was his own daughter who was giving him her services. To-night things were in a specially bad way; the common little servant girls and the young man from the greengrocer's shop, who had been fired with a desire to learn how to waltz, seemed to be stupider and awkwarder than ever; it was in vain that the Professor shouted at them; in vain that he quoted the grace and elegance of Lady Angelina Vernon to them; they lumped themselves inelegantly over the floor, treading on each other's toes; clutching desperately to each other's shoulders; breathing heavily the while like exhausted steam-engines, and all with so total a disregard of time, that the unfortunate Professor was nearly reduced to utter despair.

At length, however, the ordeal came to an end. "La leçon est finie," announced Monsieur l'Agneau with a sigh of relief. The pupils gathered up their hats and

cloaks from a bench in a corner, bowed awkwardly, and shuffled themselves away down the long passage and out under the illuminated lamp. And Edith Lamb rose slowly and wearily from the piano, and began putting the music together.

Her father wiped the perspiration from his brow with a red cotton pocket-handkerchief. He was a tall, florid-complexioned man with black curly hair and a black moustache, carefully waxed up at the ends. It was just possible that as a young man, before his face had coarsened and his figure become unwieldy, William Lamb might have been a handsome man.

"Very hard work to-night, my dear," he said to his daughter, relapsing into the ordinary British vernacular of daily life, as soon as the sound of the pupils' departing steps had died away. "Very hard work and a very poor draw! I'm completely tired out. Let's put out the lights and get round to your aunt's to supper, my love."

Edith took his arm in silence, and they

went away up the alley together in the darkness.

"Don't you think, father," she said hesitatingly, "that it would fatigue you less if you were to give up the French accent? I don't see how it can do any good, and it must be a terrible strain on you to keep it up so long."

"Give up the French accent!" he cried with absolute dismay. "My dear, what can you be thinking of? Why, it's the making of the profession! What is a dancing-master unless he's a Frenchman? Why nothing at all! It's the French accent that draws the pupils more than anything else; and after having called myself 'Monsieur l'Agneau' all my life, how could I give it up? I really wonder at you, Edith, for thinking of such a thing."

He seemed quite hurt by her suggestion.

Edith sighed. It is so hard to feel thoroughly ashamed of one's own father; she took herself bitterly to task for it. Why, she often asked herself, should she be so mean

as to be ashamed of him? Was he not a good, hard-working, honest man, earning his daily bread in the best fashion that he knew of, and conscientiously doing his utmost to drum what he professed to teach into his uninteresting daily pupils? What was there in such a career to fill a daughter's heart with shame? And yet, every time she looked at him she rejoiced afresh, in that nobody out of her past life was ever likely to see him. Sometimes the thought of Gerald Latimer, in juxtaposition with Mr. Lamb, made her almost laugh aloud in the bitterness of irony. "I did well, indeed, to be strong and to refuse to listen to him," she told herself over and over again.

And yet she suffered in her new life horribly and acutely. She lodged at her aunt's, Mrs. Mines, in Laburnam Road. In the day time she went out to teach a few pupils, which she had been fortunate enough to secure in the neighbourhood. In the evenings she played for her father at his class in the alley, and by so doing saved him the extra

expense of a regular musician. It was a miserable, joyless life ; her surroundings were mean and sordid, her associates, although they were her own relatives, were beneath her, and her daily contact with them was painful and irritating to her. She told herself, that in time, perhaps, she might sink to their level, and become as one of them ; and she thought that this possibly might, in the end, be the best thing for her. Edith's mother had been a lady, and from her childhood she herself had been well educated, and had lived amongst well-born and well-educated persons, seeing but little, and that, at long intervals, of her father and his relations. This return to him was a terrible ordeal to her, and yet she believed it to be her duty to cast in her lot with his. He was getting old and past his work. He had gradually sunk from the fashionable dancing master, who used to teach in first-rate ladies' schools, to his present low level ; and even this was such hard and uphill work that often he had a difficulty in making two ends meet. Was it not a daughter's duty, in

such a case, to devote herself to her sole remaining parent, whatever he might be?

When they got back to Mrs. Mines' little sitting-room in the basement of the house in Laburnam Road—that same room, whose mantelshelf had once been decorated by Avice's despairing letters to Dick—they found that the good lady had laid the table for supper in readiness for them. She bustled gladly and excitedly, as her brother and his daughter came in.

“Here you are!” she cried cheerfully; “and supper is all ready; I’m keeping it nice and hot for you by the kitchen fire. You’ll never guess what I’ve got for you, such a treat, Will! One of your favourite dishes! For it’s a cold night, and I am sure you look tired out. Here, Edith, I’ll take your cloak and bonnet, love.”

“Let me help you with the supper, aunt?”

“No, no, you just sit down and be quiet, I am sure you work hard enough. I thought you’d not mind the lodger, poor young woman, having her supper with us for once. She

seemed so dismal and lonely ; and with such a nice hot supper going, it didn't seem as if I could help asking her to join ; you won't mind, will you, love ? ”

“ Mind, aunt ? Isn't it your own house ? Of course I don't mind.”

And just then, the door opened, and Avice Colston entered. Edith Lamb took very little notice of her, she only saw in her a common looking young person, who was undesirable as an associate, but to whose presence she had no right to make any objection. Avice took her place at the table, and with a great flourish of trumpets, Mrs. Mines flew in, bearing a large, smoking hot dish in her arms. “ There ! ” she cried triumphantly, as she set it down upon the table ; “ and what do you all say to *that*, if you please ? ” and she looked round beamingly and delightedly upon them all.

It was tripe and onions !

“ Capital, capital ! ” cried the dancing-master, smacking his lips and rubbing his hands together. “ There ain't a better dish in the world, Bessy—you couldn't have given me

a greater treat, my dear. Sit down, sit down, and let us fall to work at once."

Mrs. Mines began helping the company.

Avice took her portion contentedly; but what was poor Mrs. Mines' horror, when Edith said, "no thank you," to the plate that was proffered to her.

"Not going to have any!" cried the poor woman in consternation.

"I—am not hungry!" stammered poor Edith, with her handkerchief suspiciously close to her nose. She *could* not bring herself to eat this horrible compound!

"I—I will have some bread and butter," she murmured apologetically; but she knew very well that her father and his sister set down her inability to cope with tripe and onions to pride and fine ladyism, and the knowledge of their condemnation was very painful to her. She had altered her life for them, but how could she alter her nature? The ominous and disapproving silence about her as she ate her bread and butter filled her with a hot sense of indignation at their injustice, and with

a bitterness at her lot amongst them which was indescribable. The sharp rap of the postman at the front door created a welcome diversion to the awkwardness of her position. Avice looked up eagerly from her plate, for Avice was always expecting a letter, which never came, and "the girl" was peremptorily dispatched by her mistress to fetch down the contents of the letter box. One missive only, and that a newspaper, was handed to Edith. It was the *Meadowshire Mercury*. In leaving behind so much that was dear to her, Edith had been unable to resist that one temptation; she had called at the principal stationer's in Truxworth, on her way to the station, and had ordered this paper to be sent to her weekly.

It always came to her like a message out of another land. She took it eagerly, pushed back her chair from the table, and tore it anxiously open. In one moment she was far away; tripe and onions became as though they were not, and her spirit was in the Midland counties. She scanned the flimsy-printed

sheets with eager eyes. There was always in her mind the conviction that nothing of any great magnitude could happen to one particular person in Meadowshire without the fact being recorded in the pages of the *Mercury*. Should Gerald Latimer distinguish himself in the field, marry a wife, sell his horses, win a steeplechase, or—oh horrible thought!—meet with an accident out hunting, then each and all these interesting events, would surely be recorded in the pages of the *Meadowshire Mercury*. The *Mercury* was often hard up for local news, there was a good deal of the scissors and paste brush about its internal composition, and the editor was not slow in making the most of every scrap of intelligence that the county could provide him with.

Edith hated these days of frost and snow, for there were no accounts of “fast things” with the S.M.F.H. now; no mention of familiar names who had gathered at the covert sides, no gossip concerning hunters and horsemen; only dismal bemoanings over

the melancholy condition of men and horses, and futile aspirations after a change of wind and a thaw. There was, however, one subject which, for lack of newer material, the editor of the *Mercury* did not fail to enlarge upon week after week until the topic was worn as threadbare as his own office coat, and this was the approaching marriage which had been publicly announced at the Hollowcroft house-warming. "We understand," wrote the feeble youth to whom the *Mercury* owed its chiefest and most grandiloquent effusions; "we understand that the marriage in high life, to which we made allusion last week, between Mr. Richard Gaskell, of Hollowcroft Hall, and the Honourable Constance Harlowe, only daughter of Lord Harlowe, will take place at Cambray Castle early in March; it is believed that Lord and Lady Harlowe will gather around them on this deeply interesting and auspicious occasion a large and brilliant assembly of the *élite* of Meadowshire, and the ancient and venerable pile which so justly excites the admiration of all visitors will re-

echo with sounds of mirth and revelry, and form a suitable and dignified background to the gay crowd which his lordship has bidden to this marriage-feast beneath the shelter of the noble structure, &c., &c.”

Edith, as she read these words, could not help smiling as she reflected how intensely delighted Lord Harlowe would be by this flourish of trumpets over his mock Norman castle, as, indeed, the worthy nobleman had been, when he had read the paragraph only a few days ago.

By the time she had quite done poring over the pages of her beloved paper, in which, however, there was to-day no mention of the name she chiefly longed to see, the too-savoury supper was at an end, and she roused herself with a guilty start to find that her aunt was clearing away the table unaided, whilst her father had settled himself down to his pipe in the chimney corner. ‘Avice Colston still lingered idly in the room.

“Oh, aunt, let me help you!” cried Edith, flinging the *Mercury* aside upon a chair;

and although the washing of dishes and the cleaning of knives and forks was absolutely revolting to her, yet she forced herself to go into the kitchen beyond to Mrs. Mines' assistance.

Avice picked up the paper which Edith had discarded. She was idle and miserable, always looking out for some sign from Dick, always expecting that he would fulfil his promises and come back and marry her. She did not see why she should work or trouble herself about the future if Dick was going to marry her she supposed they would go back to Crowbay together, and her father would provide for them both. She knew that Dick had given Mrs. Mines money for her, and, although believing him to be poor, she had been puzzled by his generosity; yet she had been too glad to be relieved from anxiety concerning her debt to Mrs. Mines and the doctor who had attended her when she was ill to trouble herself much as to where he had been able to find the money to help her.

"May I look at your paper, Miss Lamb?" she inquired of the landlady's handsome niece

whom she regarded with a certain awe and reverence, remembering all the stories that Mrs. Mines had told her about this wonderful niece of hers.

“Oh, certainly,” said Edith ; and Avice took the paper upstairs into her own room. She did not look at it at first ; she went to the window, drew back the curtain and peered anxiously out into the darkness. Avice wondered what had become of the tall gentleman whom she had seen walking up and down the street so often lately ; he was not handsome, and he was not very young, but Avice was convinced that he must have taken a fancy to herself, else why did he pace about in front of her window so often and so persistently ? It might be as well, thought Avice, to have a second string to one’s bow, and if Dick deserted her utterly, why, it would be unsufferably dull to go back to Crowbay alone, and it was always possible that she might pick up another lover in London, who might realize her ambitions quite as well as Dick might have done.

But the tall gentleman was not walking up and down outside her windows in the dark ; his devotion apparently did not carry him so far as this ; so Avice dropped the curtain and went back to the table in the middle of the room. Here standing under the gas-light, she took up the *Meadowshire Mercury* and turned its pages idly over. In borrowing it from Edith, she had thought to find in it some thrilling tale of fiction that might serve to wile away her solitary evening ; but there was nothing of the kind in the *Mercury*, only allusions to persons and things she did not understand ; anecdotes of horses and hounds that did not interest her, descriptions of places she did not know. She was about to cast it down again in disgust, wondering what on earth had made Miss Lamb devour its pages so eagerly, when suddenly her eye was caught by a name—"Mr. Richard Gaskell, of Hollowcroft Hall." Avice stood transfixed, the printed words danced before her eyes ; the room seemed to swim around her ; a sickening coldness paralyzed her.

Was this her Dick?—this man who was going to be married to Lord Harlowe's daughter?—could there be two Richard Gaskells in the world?—and what was the meaning of those words after his name—"of Hollowcroft Hall." Was he then no pauper, who would be thankful to marry her for the sake of her father's savings—no harassed and bewildered spendthrift at the end of his resources—but a rich man with a country place at his back! Was this the reason of his desertion and his silence! A wild rage sprang up in Avice's beating heart; she felt maddened and stifled with a sudden anger. She was not Stephen Colston's daughter for nothing.

"Oh, I will pay him out—I will pay him out!" she cried aloud, clenching her hands together. "I will stop this fine marriage of his. Who is there to say that he is not married to me—that I am not his lawful wife. I wear his ring, I can call myself by his name. He has made a toy of me—deluded me by his promises, and then flung me aside when he

was tired of me, to go and marry this fine lady!"

She caught up the paper, eagerly and greedily, trying to gather from its pages where these places were that were mentioned in it. "Meadowshire — Cambray Castle — Hollowcroft," she muttered. How was she to find out where they were, or if it was, indeed, he of whom these things were written.

Just then there came a knock at her door.

"Have you done with my paper?" inquired Edith Lamb, standing on the threshold.

"Do you know Richard Gaskell? the man whose marriage is talked about in this paper?" cried Avice.

Edith looked surprised.

"Yes, certainly I know him," she answered slowly and wonderingly.

"Is he—is he like *this*?" Avice was hunting in an open drawer; she tossed a photograph across the table to her visitor.

Edith took it up. "Why, it is Mr. Gaskell! How on earth did you come by it?"

"Thanks, that is all I wanted to know;

here is your paper. Good night," was all Avice said in answer.

The following morning as Edith Lamb, well wrapped up in a long fur cloak and a thick veil, was flying along Laburnam Road, on her way to her daily lessons to the two little girls she taught every morning, she was suddenly confronted by a tall, dark gentleman, who came to a dead stop in front of her, and addressed her by her name.

"Miss Lamb! Surely I am not mistaken; have I not seen you at Mrs. Clitheroe's?"

"Oh, Mr. Harlowe!"

"What on earth are you doing in this part of the world! Have you left the Clitheroes'?"

"Yes, I left some weeks ago. I am living here with my aunt."

"What, here—in Laburnam Road?"

Edith, as she nodded her assent, had a guilty feeling of delight at the bottom of her heart. Who could tell whether Gerald Latimer might not, perchance, hear of this meeting?

"Perhaps, then," continued Mr. Harlowe "you can give me some information. I am in search of a young person, the daughter of—ahem—an old servant, to whom I am able to be of some service. I was told she lived in this road. You may perhaps have heard of her; her name is Avice Colston."

"How very extraordinary! Why, she is living in the very house I have come from, No. 15. You will find her there."

And then Mr. Harlowe thanked her with so much effusion and gratitude that she was quite amused at it; and he took off his hat to her and passed on.





Chapter the Tenth.

A CIRCUS.

"Between two horses which doth bear him best?"

"Henry VI.," SHAKESPEARE.

There's something in a flying horse."

WORDSWORTH.





CHAPTER X.

A CIRCUS.

"Between two horses which doth bear him best?"

"Henry VI.," SHAKESPEARE.

"There's something in a flying horse."

WORDSWORTH.

ONE morning, during that fortnight of frost and snow, Eve stood in her habit at the stable door at Misrule. The boys had laid down a tan ride in a round ring in the field in front of the house. Being somewhat short of employment, this had been a delightful occupation for them for the last two days, and had kept them quite quiet and out of mischief, which during frosty weather, upon the principle of the idle hands for which Satan obligingly finds work to do, was often a somewhat difficult task.

Eve was now preparing to exercise the stud round and round the tan ring in the field.

Sunbeam came out first, so fresh that it was a work of difficulty to get on his back. Greyson and Gerald, one on each side of him, led him carefully over the stones of the yard to the field gate. Then Eve gave him his head and he flourished his heels in a state of ecstasy for the space of five minutes or more, and then he started off round the soft brown road laid down for him, with his head well up at a long, swinging gallop.

"Look out, Eve," shouted Gerald, after her, and then Eve saw that Charlie and little Tom had fixed up hurdles at intervals across the ride as a surprise for her.

"Oh, how jolly!" cried back Eve excitedly, and in another minute Sunbeam was flying over the hurdles one after the other with as keen an appreciation of the fun as had his mistress.

In a few minutes all the boys, each on his pet animal, were after her, racing round and round in a ring. It was like a circus. Old Greyson and the under groom stood in the middle with Balzac and Viper and all the fox terriers in a group together, and with diffi-

culty restrained them from tearing after the horses; as it was they barked wildly and vociferously in a confused canine chorus. The sun shone down brightly on the frost-spangled field, with its red-brown ring in the centre. The clear, cold air rang with merry shouts from the boys, with the thud of the horses' rapid feet as they flew round and round. And it was this scene of animation and excitement which burst upon Lucy Clitheroe as she turned her bay ponies in at the straight gravel drive that led up to Misrule.

"Hallo! what are they all about!" said Lucy to Miss Hale, her new governess, who sat by her side in the pony carriage with little Lily on her lap. Miss Hale was a meek, short-sighted young person of unattractive appearance. Lucy was beginning to be anxious over Gerald's behaviour to her. Ever since the festivities at Hollowcroft he had never once been to see her; she could not think what had happened to him, nor why he had suddenly failed in his devotion to her. He

never came to her house, and as the hounds had not been out she had had no chance of meeting him out of doors. Why had he not been near her? Was he ill, she wondered; or was he getting tired of her; or was he offended? She had rated him soundly and somewhat crossly, when, on the night of the ball at Hollowcroft, he had come back after more than an hour's absence declaring that he had forgotten all about her bracelet, and had only been out to have a smoke in the gardens; had she spoken to him too sharply on that occasion, and was he angry? At all events Lucy felt that she must get to the bottom of it somehow, so she ordered her ponies and took Miss Hale and Lily, and though it was a long drive she came over to Misrule to see what Gerald was doing with himself.

Her appearance was an unwelcome interruption to the young Latimers; they were all perfectly happy, and with three of them, at least, Lucy had never been a favourite. They were, however, bound to be hospitable

and civil. When the pony carriage drew up at the gate of the field, Gerald, who was nearest, rode up at once lifting his hat to her. He gave one sharp glance at the other lady beside her, and his heart that had bounded unaccountably at the sight of her sank down again in cold disappointment when he perceived that it was a stranger.

“Good morning, Mrs. Clitheroe, you find us making the best of our hard fate, you see!”

“You seem to me to have all gone mad; what *are* you doing? Miss Hale, get out and take Lily for a trot along the road, I am sure her feet must be cold and cramped, poor angel. Gerald, what has become of you all this time? You have never been near me! Am I in disgrace?”

“My dear Mrs. Clitheroe!” Gerald looked uncomfortable, but he noticed with joy that Eve was hastening to his side.

“*Mrs. Clitheroe!* Since when so much formality? I can see you are angry with poor little me. Alas! what have I done! Oh,

Miss Latimer, good morning. I am so much entertained by your steeple-chase."

"We are exercising the hunters. Won't you come in, Mrs. Clitheroe?" said Eve civilly.

"Oh, I wouldn't disturb you for the world; I had much rather sit here and watch you; do go on."

"You will, at all events, stop to lunch?"

Lucy glanced at Gerald, he was stooping down over his right stirrup leather.

"Oh, well, thanks," began Mrs. Clitheroe doubtfully. Gerald did not press the invitation. "If I might put up the ponies for an hour or so? It is a long drive, you know."

What was Gerald to do? He had perforce to get off his horse and to help the lady out of her carriage, to see that it was taken on to the stables, and to provide the fair Lucy with a chair from the house, a footstool for her feet, a shawl to wrap round her shoulders, a rug to tuck round her knees, so that, as she said, she might be a trouble to nobody, but just sit by and watch the fun.

Gerald wished her anywhere—he was sick to death of her, of her arch looks, of her half-tender reproaches, of her little flattering whispers; they were all hateful in his eyes now that there was no longer any need to keep up the delusion of his devotion for Edith Lamb's sake. He wished he could shake himself free of her and of this hateful flirtation, but the fair Lucy had no mind to let herself be shaken off; and Gerald found—as many of us do—that the consequences of our foolishness outlive our taste for the folly we have once thought so harmless. In common politeness he could do no less than linger by his visitor's side; he felt very savage—his morning's fun was spoilt. Charlie and little Tom were already back again on the farther side of the field, altering the hurdles and hopping backwards and forwards over them in a truly delightful fashion. Eve had slipped off Sunbeam, and was preparing to mount her little brown mare Caprice, which Greyson had just brought out to her. She sprang lightly into the saddle,

settled her skirt with one hand, and trotted slowly off.

“How well your sister looks in the saddle,” remarked Mrs. Clitheroe, following her with her eyes.

“There’s no one in all Meadowshire can come near her,” replied Gerald proudly.

“How pretty she looks too, this morning, such a colour, such bright eyes! She doesn’t seem to care much about Mr. Gaskell’s marriage, does she?”

“Care! Why should she care? I really don’t understand you!”

“Oh, don’t look so cross and angry. I am not saying any harm of her, am I? though people did say——”

“I wish people would mind their own business,” retorted Gerald hotly. “What is Gaskell to her, or any man? She is happy with us,” for Gerald no more guessed Eve’s secret than she guessed his.

Eve was in wild, almost in boisterous spirits, now-a-days. She was possessed by a very

fever of restless excitement; she flung herself heart and soul into every passing interest. Never had she seemed to love her boys, her horses, her dogs, with such a fervour of adoration as she did now. She told herself over and over again, with a passionate reiteration that almost deceived herself, that, with them, and with them alone, was her life and her heart; that she wanted nothing, desired nothing, hankered for nothing on the face of the wide world, save only her home life with those three beloved boys and with the dumb creatures that surrounded her happy home. As to Mr. Gaskell, she repeated to herself over and over again that he was nothing to her—absolutely nothing; she crushed out every thought of him from her mind, and resolutely determined that it was but her fancy and not her heart that had been touched for one brief moment by him. Yet, in her heart of hearts, she was secretly thankful for the days of frost which kept him perforce out of her sight. “When the frost goes,” said Eve to herself, “then by that time

I shall be strong again and have got over my folly."

There had been just a word or two that had passed between him and her, before she had bidden him a public good-bye in the hall at Hollowcroft, before a dozen persons. "Good-bye, Mr. Gaskell," she had said to him; then brightly and merrily: "Thank you very much for a delightful visit, which we have all enjoyed so much, and you must certainly give us another ball as soon as ever you are married."

Even little Tom, who watched her so closely with such a devouring anxiety, could hardly believe his ears when he heard her, or realize that she was the same girl who had been heartbroken and crushed upstairs in her bedroom only the very night before.

Nor would any one present have guessed that not ten minutes ago Dick and Eve had met accidentally in a far-away upper passage of the house; met, and stood stock still facing each other with white, haggard faces.

"Eve," he whispered hoarsely, "what can you think of me?"

"What does it matter what I think of you?" she had answered him a little wildly.

"Before ever I saw you I was half bound to her, then afterwards I shut my eyes—I let things drift. When I found that I loved you, I thought I could perhaps have broken myself loose."

"Ah!" she cried, with a sharp ring of pain in her voice. "Ah, what does all that signify. Why tell me all this?" For this confession of his love, these excuses for his conduct, were terrible to her to bear.

"Will you never forgive me?" he pleaded, not daring so much as to take her hand, but looking at her with such a burden of utter woe in his dark blue eyes that she could not endure the sight of them.

Her own filled with sudden tears. "I have nothing to forgive—nothing," she murmured brokenly; "there are things in life that cannot be helped, cannot be altered, and—and God bless you!"

For face to face with the man she loves, a true woman can never be hard. Howsoever he may have sinned against her, in whatsoever manner he may have injured her, always when she looks into the eyes that have once won her love, when she is alone with him, when he is gentle and humble to her, then all her pride perishes, and all her resentment dies away and she remembers only that she loves him.

“I was never good enough, never worthy of you,” murmurs Dick. “There are things in my life that you do not even dream of, things that make me unfit even for your friendship, Eve, yet say—say that you will be my friend?”

“Yes, your friend, always, always, dear Dick,” she answered, with the tears fairly raining down her cheeks.

And so they parted. That was their good-bye. That other in the big hall ten minutes later was only a clever piece of acting for the benefit of the bystanders, and not a farewell at all in any sense of the word.

And now Eve, trotting away on Caprice, is thinking far more about Gerald than about her own troubles. She is deeply annoyed that Mrs. Clitheroe should have come over to ensnare and enslave him once more; it has seemed to her that Gerald has manfully endeavoured, of late, to shake off his folly and to put a stop to the somewhat undesirable flirtation into which he had embarked, for never once had Eve connected Gerald's visits to the Clitheroes' in any manner with the tall, dark-eyed governess who had lately left them. Truth to say, Edith Lamb had occupied so unprominent a position in the world of South Meadowshire, that scarcely any one, save Gerald himself, had noticed her presence or remarked her sudden departure.

There was always such a whirl of excitement in the hunting world, such a hurrying off to the meets, such exuberance of spirits over a good run, so much gossip over the incidents of the field, that persons who were without that charmed circle wherein the fox-hunters spent their happy lives, were some-

what apt to be overlooked and forgotten altogether. That Gerald, of all people, should have been attracted seriously by a quiet woman who had never been outside a horse in her life, when there were so many pretty women married and single, who rode to hounds in his company every day of his life was a thing that never entered even as a remote possibility into Eve's imagination. She only saw in her brother's conduct, as did all the world, an undesirable flirtation with a silly married woman, and she was proportionally angry with that woman for running after Gerald into his own dominions.

"What on earth does that horrid woman want to come here for?" she said to little Tom, when she joined him on the other side of the field. "Why can't she let Gerald alone?"

"Gerald doesn't care a brass farthing about her," said little Tom, who was as sapient as the bird of wisdom himself; "can't you see how bored he looks; he'd give his eyes to be with us."

"Why doesn't he leave her, then?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"You women always have by long chalks the best of things; a fellow is always bound to be civil to you," and little Tom would say no more.

"Aren't you going to take Caprice over the hurdles, Eve?" here said Charlie riding up. "I'll give you a lead if you like," and he went sailing away straight for the hurdles in front of him.

But Caprice was true to her name, she was at times a brilliant fencer and would jump a five-barred gate, when her blood was up, in grand style; but there were times again when no power on earth would get her over a mole hill, and to-day the obstinate fit was upon her. Caprice saw no good reason why she should be taken in cold blood over a succession of wooden hurdles set up round and round in a ring, when there was neither fox nor hounds in sight, and only a keen frosty blue sky overhead. Eve got her up to within a yard of the hurdle, going crab fashion to one side with her head in the air,

then with a snort she turned short round and cantered away to the side. This performance was repeated over and over again, Caprice growing ever more and more obstinate in refusing, Eve becoming ever more and more determined to force her over. Greyson fetched more hurdles, and the jump was made wider and higher; little Tom sent for his cutting whip, the others all gathered about her, fascinated by the battle which was going on, and Gerald and Mrs. Clitheroe walked across the field to watch it.

"It's exactly what my new horse does," said Lucy; "I am really afraid to ride him."

"That is not the way to cure a horse of refusing; he ought to be ridden every day."

"I wish to goodness you would ride him for me, Gerald."

"With pleasure," replied Gerald, hardly listening to her.

"Why shouldn't we get up some steeple-chases in front of my house; we might have some capital fun, don't you think so?"

"Capital I should say. There, she nearly

got her over that time; give her one good cut, Eve," he hallooed, far more interested in his sister's performances than in Mrs. Clitheroe's conversation. "Have you got a spur on?"

"We might get up a lovely course across those meadows below the house, and you and Fred Harlowe would be stewards, just amongst ourselves you know, and you shall ride that horse of mine that refuses so horribly, will you?"

"Oh, certainly." Gerald hardly knew to what he was pledging himself.

Meanwhile Eve, who was a capital horse-woman, was fighting out her battle with Caprice, she was very quiet with her but very firm; sometimes she patted her and talked to her, sometimes she dug her spurred heel into her side and gave her one sharp cut with Tom's whip, and in the end the human will triumphed over the equine obstinacy, and after a struggle of nearly twenty minutes Caprice hopped over the hurdles as sweetly and easily as if she had been doing nothing else all the morning. Amidst a chorus of

applause Eve took her all round the ring, over four more hurdles, and then trotted back to the delighted group of spectators.

"I am fairly worn out!" she cried laughing. "Let us go in to lunch now. Gerald, bring Mrs. Clitheroe in."

And it was when they were all at lunch that Mrs. Clitheroe once again started the subject of steeplechases.

"Gerald and I have settled it all," she said to Charlie; "it will be the greatest fun in the world, everybody will enter their own hunters; I shall stand a big lunch. We won't, of course, have any strangers or roughs, only just ourselves and our friends; Gerald has promised to ride my new horse for me."

"Have I?" interpolated Gerald, but he, as well as the others, was bitten with the idea—anything like sport commended itself to the young Latimers. Mrs. Clitheroe saw this and became enthusiastic, she liked to be popular and to start something new, and above all else she wanted to arouse Gerald's fading interest in herself, so she clung to the idea

with persistency, and by the time lunch was over even Eve began to get excited about it too. They settled everything—the entries, the number of races, the height and width of the fences, the amount of the prizes; and when Mrs. Clitheroe drove away again, there is no denying that, fired by this exciting topic, every one of the young Latimers was in a very good temper with her.

Thus there is a good deal of truth in what was afterwards said, that the “Mepham Park Steeplechases” that were destined to result in such disastrous consequences were originated in that hotbed of mischief and lawlessness—Misrule.





Chapter the Eleventh.

IN LONDON.

“ When love begins to sicken and decay,
It useth an enforced ceremony ;
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.”

“ Julius Cæsar,” SHAKESPEARE.





CHAPTER XI.

IN LONDON.

"When love begins to sicken and decay,
It useth an enforced ceremony;
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith."

"Julius Cæsar," SHAKESPEARE.

"A TELEGRAM, Constance! Is it from Richard?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Nothing wrong I trust?"

"Oh, no;" she turned away with a moment of embarrassment, stooping to gather together some ribbons and laces that lay on the table.

"Only he is not coming up to-day."

"Not coming?" repeated Lady Harlowe, with an angry inflection. "Then this is the third time he has played us this trick! Your father will be seriously annoyed."

"He wants to hunt, the frost has lasted so long you know, mamma, it is really not wonderful; oh, I don't blame him."

"I blame him, excessively," replied her mother with a thundercloud on her brow. "And so will your father. Your Uncle and Aunt Fothergill dine here to-night on purpose to be introduced to him. Your godfather, Lord Lyneford, also has been asked to meet him; the dinner table will be put out entirely. I am very angry indeed with Mr. Gaskell."

Constance trembled mutely and stood looking out of the window with eyes so brimful of tears that they were unable to see the passing objects in the busy street without. For the Harlowes were in London; Constance's *trousseau* had been found to be so all important; a matter of so grave a nature, that Lady Harlowe had been unable to negotiate its formation satisfactorily in Meadowshire. It had been a difficult matter to move Lord Harlowe, but his wife had played persistently upon the theme of economy, had dwelt upon the season for "selling off" at the large shops, upon the advantages to be accrued from dealing with Messrs. Whiteley and Messrs. Gorrings, to say

nothing of her ever beloved Co-operative Stores, and she had enlarged upon the dearness and the untrustworthiness of all Truxworth tradesmen to such a degree, that at last, sorely against the grain, the good old gentleman had given a grudging consent to the proposed migration; a furnished house at a very moderate rent in Ebury Street had been taken for a month, and the Harlowes came up to town.

Constance had her misgivings, she did not like being in London whilst her lover was in Meadowshire, and she remonstrated faintly and feebly against the proposed exodus from home. Her mother silenced her objections summarily, bidding her hold her tongue and assuring her that it was all for her own good.

"And as for Richard," she added, her parents would never call him "Dick;" "he will of course run up and see us constantly, quite as often as it is desirable for you to meet; I do not approve of lovers being incessantly sitting side by side, it is a very bad style."

Lady Harlowe need not have been uneasy on that score. Dick evinced a remarkable remissness in hurrying out that programme of frequent "runnings up" to town which his future mother-in-law laid down for him. He came, in fact, as seldom as he could, and went away again as quickly as possible. Whenever he came he was scrupulously polite to the lady whom it was his destiny to marry, he inquired her opinion on every subject that concerned her future life and was careful to carry out her smallest wishes, he brought her handsome presents of jewellery and occasionally entered bearing huge bouquets of hot-house flowers in his hands ; his inquiries concerning her health were the acme of lover-like anxiety, and his interest in all the details of her dresses and laces was a pattern and marvel to behold. But Dick never asked to see his lady-love alone, never seemed to wish for those sweet brief interviews where common sense is banished and sober words find no place, such as are so dear and so delightful to most lovers. He kissed Con-

stance's hand respectfully and gracefully in the presence of her parents, he never seemed to desire to press her lips to his own or to hold her fast-clasped within his arms. These omissions it was not possible to her to put into words, nor indeed would her old-fashioned parents have understood her complaints on such a score, but at the bottom of her heart Constance felt them bitterly. She knew that once, in the time that was long ago, he had loved her ardently and wooed her hotly, and she knew that in this fashion he loved her no longer.

Ah! why then had he sought to marry her? Why had he raised her to the seventh heaven of happiness only that she might sink back again to the dead level of her loveless despair?

Had she been a braver, truer woman, Constance Harlowe would never have suffered herself to remain in this position; she would have faced the truth boldly, have told him that she knew he no longer loved her and have offered to set him free from an engagement that was apparently irksome to him.

But she had no courage. She was too timid to tackle her lover and too fearful of offending her parents to bring about any alteration in her life by her own deeds. She trembled at the bare thought. How, when her father and mother had brought about her engagement to this man of her fancy ; when they had settled and arranged everything—invited the guests, ordered the *trousseau*, published the engagement far and wide amongst friends and relations, how could she by her own actions, unaided and alone, dare to stand forth and undo all that they had planned and settled for her? It was an impossibility to one so craven hearted as was Constance. In the days when she might have been happy indeed, she had lacked the courage to stretch forth her hands and grasp her chance ; and now, when a false glamour of unreal joy was thrust upon her, neither had she the strength of mind and purpose to refuse the lurid semblance of a peace that would be no peace, but only utter ruin to her for ever.

All that was in her was to be silently mis-

erable, to be conscious that Dick was only going to marry her because he thought himself obliged to do so, and yet to be physically and morally incapable of acting upon that consciousness. In her heart she suffered cruelly—she was tortured by jealousy—she was jealous of Eve, jealous indeed of every woman whose name Dick mentioned casually, and jealous of the very pleasures and occupations which kept him away from her. Had she shown her jealousy it might have been better for her—but she showed nothing. She was only to him a cold-natured woman, whom he daily found less lovable and less attractive.

And yet Dick believed that to marry Constance Harlowe was the one and only *thing* that without being openly branded as a black-guard it was left to him to do. Eve was lost to him for ever. Eve whom he had learnt to love so suddenly and so unexpectedly, and whose love he knew also that, had his hands been free, he might have won! There had been indeed a time, a brief space when wild dreams of shaking off all other ties had fired his brain

with wild hopes ; when he had told himself that the Harlowes had played fast and loose with him, and that no one could blame him if he paid them back in their own coin, and that it was possible to him to retire with honour from the anomalous position into which Constance's indecision, and her father's ridiculous scruples had forced him. But after Lord Harlowe had made that public announcement of his engagement at Hollowcroft this course of action was no longer open to him. He could not turn round and say aloud at the conclusion of the old gentleman's well meant speech : "I have changed my mind. You have kept me waiting too long for a definite answer, and now I no longer want your daughter."

How is a man to say such a thing as this before a room full of people ? No, he had been obliged to accept the position which had been thrust upon him. He had stood still like one in an evil dream, and had received the congratulations of everybody present ; his health, and Constance's health had

been drunk; speeches had been uttered at his own dinner-table reiterating the terrible reality, and not a cart-load of chains nor a gross of wedding things could have bound him faster and more irrevocably to Lord Harlowe's daughter, than had done that nightmare-like evening which had rung the death-blow to all his dearest and sweetest hopes.

From that very hour Eve was lost to him. He tried not to think of her, tried to banish the sweet, bright face from his memory, and the trustful gold brown eyes from his imagination. He told himself that she was dead to him, utterly dead. In her sweetness and goodness she had forgiven him, had prayed God to bless him, and had told him that she would always be his friend. He could ask nothing more of her, that had been their last farewell; there could be nothing more spoken between them, save commonplace words that all the world might hear, to the very end of both their lives.

He shivered a little when he thought of it. Sometimes again he remembered Avice, and

then he was glad that he was to marry Constance, for surely to marry Lord Harlowe's daughter was a wiser, better thing than to sink into the abyss of a low marriage with such a one as Avice Colston! He was sorry for Avice, of course, knowing that he had behaved badly to her, but "what's done's done, and can't be mended," and he intended when once he was safely married to Constance to write to her a penitent letter, sending her some money, offering to help her permanently in any way she liked and thus to be comfortably rid of her and of the consequences of his sins for evermore. That Avice Colston, in the far-away seclusion of Laburnam Road, would ever hear of his marriage to Lord Harlowe's daughter before the event took place was a contingency which did not enter into his mind.

Constance, as she stood leaning against the narrow window of the furnished drawing-room in Ebury Street, holding her recalcitrant lover's telegram still crunched up in her hand, felt very miserable indeed. Her mother had

gone away in a high dudgeon to break the news of Dick's defection to her father. (It was quite true what she had said, this made the third time that Dick had sent her a telegram excusing himself from coming up to dinner in Ebury Street. To day he gave no excuse, pleaded no impediment.

"Very sorry I cannot come to-day," that was all the message said. It was Constance herself who had mentioned the hunting, seeking for very pride's sake to make some excuse for his remissness.

"I wonder if it is that Latimer girl who keeps him," said poor Constance to herself—in which suspicion she did her lover infinite injustice, for Dick had kept himself scrupulously out of Eve's way. "Shall I always have to bear this sort of thing after we are married? Will she always be enticing him away, and he always running after her?" And it did not occur to her to think that if such was in any way likely to be the case it would be better far that no marriage between them should ever take place.

"Constance, have you forgotten that we are due at Madame Parure's to try on your wedding bodice?" said her mother's voice at the door.

"What does papa say?" she asked, tremblingly, as she followed her mother upstairs.

"About your bodice?"

"No, about Dick's not coming."

"We will not discuss the subject, if you please, Constance," replied her mother frowning severely.

And Constance, as usual, dared say no more.

The fact is, that Lady Harlowe had given her own version of Mr. Gaskell's defection to her husband. Annoyed as she herself was with him, she had no desire to anger her spouse against him; she was as much set upon this good match for her daughter as ever, and she knew how half-hearted had been Lord Harlowe's consent to the giving up of his favourite scheme of marrying his child to her cousin. It would not be safe to excite his indignation against Dick; he was capable of forbidding the marriage even now, were he

furnished with a decent pretext for doing so. She had therefore told him that "Richard" had telegraphed in great distress, that important business detained him at Hollowcroft.

"I am glad to find that the young man is conscientious enough to place business before pleasure," had been Lord Harlowe's serious reply.

"Take care you don't mention the subject in any way to your father," cautioned the clever old lady as she set off in a hired fly with her daughter to the dressmaker's, and she knew perfectly that Constance was far too timid to disregard the injunction.

Madame Parure awaited them with the half-completed white satin body. This garment was as an emblem of her unalterable fate to Constance. As she stood patiently and meekly, whilst Madame Parure pulled and pinned and pinched, chattering volubly in broken English over the defects and deficiencies of her angular figure, whilst her mother stood by superintending and bargaining, Constance felt that nothing short of a miracle could

prevent Dick from marrying her. "He *could* not break it off now," she said to herself, "with my very wedding-dress cut out and half made!" And she was glad as she thought so. Every fresh link in the chain that bound him to her made her rejoice, and yet that links and chains should be needed at all made her miserable.

"But for Eve Latimer he would love me still," she said to herself, as she and her mother drove down Bond Street on further purchases and shoppings intent; "or if she had never come between us."

She sat looking in a dreary fashion out of the window of the slow-moving and melancholy conveyance which it pleased her mother to drive about in—for it had not been thought worth the expense of bringing up the family chariot to town, and Lady Harlowe would rather have perished than have entered a hansom cab, which the traditions of her youth caused her to regard as a morally dangerous vehicle, totally unfit for modest and ladylike women to be seen in. So a fusty

hired brougham, with a lame steed, and a very dirty and red-nosed old coachman, whose legs were swathed in a horse rug, was engaged at so much an hour whenever her ladyship desired to drive about London. As this uninviting carriage proceeded at a slow jog trot pace down Bond Street, Constance suddenly caught sight of a familiar face amongst the crowd on the pavement.

"Surely there is Mr. Charles Latimer, mamma."

"Oh! so there is, I declare. I will ask him to dinner to-night, to fill Richard's place, and that will make the table even. Hi! coachman, stop! stop!"

Lady Harlowe hung her head, adorned with a marvellous structure of velvet and feathers, out of the window, and hallooed loudly to her charioteer.

Charlie heard her cries, recognized her, and came quickly up to them, lifting his hat to the two ladies.

Now Charlie was the irresponsible member of the Latimer family, he was neither so

sharp as Tom nor so sympathetic as Gerald; he had a terrible way of treading on people's corns, of letting hidden cats out of bags, and of springing unexpected mines in unsuspecting people's faces.

Charlie having politely excused himself on the score of a previous engagement from accepting Lady Harlowe's invitation to dinner, proceeded to "put his foot into it."

"I hope Mr. Fred Harlowe is better!" he remarked serenely.

"Better! Is he ill then? Wasn't he out hunting yesterday?"

"Oh! don't you know that he is not in Meadowshire at all?—he is in London. He came up to consult a doctor, he has been away nearly a week."

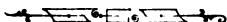
"Nearly a week! and has never been to call upon us!" cried Lady Harlowe in great surprise; "how very extraordinary! Perhaps, Mr. Latimer, you can give us some more Meadowshire news. Mr. Gaskell was to have dined with us to-night, but he has been prevented from coming to town."

"But he *is* in town!" cried Charlie laughing; "it seems to me that we are all in London!"

"Oh, but that is quite impossible, Mr. Latimer, we have to-day received a telegram from Mr. Gaskell——"

"Telegram, or no telegram," interrupted Charlie plunging, nay wallowing into the very mire, with a delicious unconsciousness of what he was doing, "he *is* in town, for I saw him in a hansom not five minutes ago, with his portmanteau above him, just come from Euston no doubt, and Gerald and I are going to dine with him at the Windham to-night; he's got a bachelor party, that's what he's up for."

"Drive on coachman," said Lady Harlowe in an awful voice of horror and indignation. But Constance was not sorry. At least he was not in South Meadowshire with Eve!





Chapter the Twelfth.

AN IMPROMPTU DINNER.

“ You say to me-wards your affection’s strong,
Pray love me little so you love me long.”

HERRICK.





CHAPTER XII.

AN IMPROMPTU DINNER.

"You say to me-wards your affection's strong,
Pray love me little so you love me long."
HERRICK.

GERALD LATIMER was not, however, one of Dick Gaskell's guests at the Windham that evening.

At six o'clock in the afternoon he had found himself sauntering in an aimless fashion along the western side of Regent Street. It was now in the middle of February, and the days were lengthening, the dusk, however, was by this time creeping on, and the street lamps were lit ; nevertheless it was still light enough to distinguish the faces of the persons upon the pavement.

Gerald walked along with that sort of absorbed expression which the face of a man who is moving amongst a crowd of strangers insensibly assumes.

He was thinking about Edith Lamb, the thought of her was, indeed, almost incessantly in his mind ; he had made no effort to discover her address nor yet to follow her, believing that all such efforts would be distasteful to her. But he was just as much determined as ever to stick to her, and to make her his wife some day, although that day might possibly be a far distant one. He had just that kind of depth of nature which is pre-eminently masculine, and " whose strength is to sit still " — a dogged persistency that owed nothing to mere dash and impetuosity of action, and secure of one thing, Edith's affection, he was content to wait at a time when waiting appeared the only thing to be done. There was in his mind, too, a deep regret that he had thrown away at the time of his father's death the profession in which he had been placed by that father's care. A clerkship in a government office is not much, certainly, either in the way of wealth or of position, but it is at all events a certainty and a standpoint, and in addition to his own

fortune would have made up a respectable income for a man to marry upon. For the first time his conduct and that of his brothers, in shaking off the responsibilities of life in order to give themselves more fully up to its pleasures, seemed to him to have been both foolish and selfish.

“Eve was right enough,” he said to himself as he walked along. “She said at the time that we should all live to repent it—and I for one do so heartily. As to our compact of not marrying, it was of course foolish and untenable. Eve is always right—but then, had we never gone to Misrule I might never have met Edith.”

And then suddenly out of that great void of ever succeeding unknown faces, that came in a ceaseless panorama towards him, there shone out suddenly upon him the face of Edith herself!

He had no thought of meeting her. If indeed he had desired to stumble across her, the very last place in all London where he would have sought for her would have been

in Regent Street; the very last hour in the day at which he would have expected to find her walking abroad, would have been this.

It was one of those happy accidents that in their unforeseenness almost come upon one with the force of a miracle, so that to the end of one's life, one does not cease to marvel and to wonder at them.

At the same moment they saw each other, and stood transfixed, grasping each other's hands with a glad and almost unspeakable delight.

Edith's pale face was flushed, her great sombre eyes were lit up with the suddenness of this unexpected joy.

"What are you doing here? Where have you come from?" were his first coherent words.

She held up a square parcel laughingly.

"A bookseller's in Piccadilly—school books for my pupils."

He took the parcel from her unresisting hands, and turned round with her.

"And now where are you going?"

"To the underground station at Portland Road."

"I am going with you."

"I have to stop by the way."

"Where?"

"You ask too many questions," she said, but with that keen inward sense of delight at his pertinacity, which always possessed her when she was with him. "Nevertheless, for once, I have no objection to gratify your curiosity; I am going to stop at a confectioner's."

"What on earth for?"

"For a bath bun and a glass of milk."

He looked at her with a perplexed expression.

Edith laughed.

"Don't look so horrified, the explanation is simple. I have an appointment at seven o'clock. I must get something to eat as my work lasts till nine."

"And a bun and a glass of milk are equivalent to—what meal may I ask?"

"Dinner, I suppose," she answered laugh-

ing, "to what *you* will be eating at eight o'clock, you know—soup, fish, cutlets, sweet-breads, wild ducks, &c., &c., will not that be about the programme laid down for you to-night?"

"Do you mean to tell me you are not going to have any dinner?" inquired Gerald with a growing sense of horror—there is something almost amounting to a tragedy to the mind of the ordinary well-fed young Englishman, in the contemplation of a dinnerless evening.

"Oh, I had a good luncheon at one o'clock, and I shall have supper no doubt at nine; don't look so scared, I am really not an object of pity."

"But—no dinner!" repeated Gerald in a low voice of dismay. "Oh, no, it's not to be borne; here, wait a second."

He dashed into a post office, scribbled off a telegram to the Windham Club, and was back again with her in less than a minute.

"Now," he said with a cheerful brightness, born of his new determination; "now we

are going to have our dinner together, you and I."

"But Gerald——"

He had taken her parcel, he now took her hand, and under cover of the fast gathering darkness he tucked it safely under his arm. "Now I have got you and you cannot get away," he said with a ring of glee in his voice—"come along."

He took her into a quiet bye-street ; through a door, up a narrow staircase, into a small room where a table was laid for dinner. It was a French restaurant, noted for its good cooking, its fine wines, and its fabulous prices. An obsequious foreign waiter followed them upstairs.

"What would Monsieur have? "

"Dinner at once. Soup, fish, cutlets, sweet-breads, and wild duck, was not that what you said?" turning slightly to Edith.

"I don't half like it," she said when the man had left the room.

"Do you have such a superfluity of happiness in your present life, Miss Lamb, that you

object to taking a bit more when it tumbles into your arms? ”

“ No ! God knows. As to happiness, I have little enough.”

“ Then give thanks, as I do ; we are going to have a happy hour together, you and I.”

“ I shall be very late,” she demurred, as she took off her cloak and gloves.

“ That is a mere detail, you will have to be late.”

“ What a wilful person you are.” She reflected that her father could probably get along without her by taking the beginners for the first half hour, and she resigned herself to be happy.

“ Ah ! You will find out how wilful I can be, some day,” he said, as he helped her to soup ; “ when you are Mrs. Gerald Latimer.”

“ I shall never be that,” she answered grave at once.

“ Do the same objections still hold good then? ”

“ Yes, always the same ; I will never marry you, Gerald ; but I shall never marry any one

else, because I shall always be fond of you."

"Well, that is some consolation!" He was too happy to be serious. "And 'never, we know, is a long day. Will you tell me what you are doing now?"

"You want to know too much. Let me ask you a question, for a change. How is dear Mrs. Clitheroe?"

"Mrs. Clitheroe be——!" and Gerald applied to that absent little lady an adjective more forcible than polite.

And Edith, although she ought doubtless to have been shocked at the naughty word, only laughed at him happily.

Too soon did that delightful and ever-to-be-remembered dinner come to an end; indeed, they never got as far as the wild duck after all, for time flies on lightning wheels when one is happy, and Edith did not care to linger too long.

Gerald, who was not without cunning, proposed to take her to her destination in a hansom, but Miss Lamb understood

the purpose underlying this offer too well to accept it.

"By underground railway to Notting Hill Gate, so far and no farther may you come with me," she declared, and with this ultimatum Gerald was forced to be content.

"Confess," he said to her when they were in the railway together ; "confess, that I have behaved well. I have never tried to find out where you have hidden yourself."

"You have always behaved well to me," she answered him gently.

Gerald sat forward looking at her earnestly ; they had the carriage to themselves ; the light of the lamp above fell fitfully upon her features, it was a face that strength and character made chiefly beautiful. A face, that all perhaps might not learn to love, but once loved, it was a face to love for ever.

"But have you ever considered," said Gerald to her, "that to me you are behaving *very badly*?"

She looked startled. Her eyes met his questioningly. This, truly, was a view of the

subject, which had never hitherto occurred to her.

“How do you mean?” she faltered.

“You know that I love you.”

“You have told me so,” she admitted with a half smile.

He went on unheeding her interruption. “You are well aware that my whole life is bound up in you; you have even promised to become my wife under certain conditions.”

“Which are unfulfilled,” she said quickly.

He made an impatient gesture. “And yet you deny to me the knowledge which is my absolute right, of where and how you are living, of whether your existence is safe or dangerous, easy or difficult, an existence of plenty, or of a hand-to-hand struggle with poverty. You give thus to the man, whose love you have not rejected, an infinite amount of unnecessary pain and uncertainty; you aggravate my sorrow in being parted from you—you torture me with needless cruelty. Oh, yes, Edith, deny it if you can, you are behaving badly, very badly to me.”

For a moment she was silent, looking away from him with eyes in which the tears gathered quickly. She knew that in a measure he was right, and that there was justice in his words; and she could see that in his eyes her conduct must indeed appear to be cruel and capricious; for how was he to guess that it was for his own sake that she desired him to be in ignorance for ever of her surroundings, that she feared to lead him on into a position which he might regret, and which his world might condemn? And yet, what he said to her was true—oh, yes, it was true.

“This much, I will tell you, then,” she said at length, with a certain humility, “since you say it is your right to ask it of me; my life is neither dangerous, nor difficult, on the contrary, it is absolutely safe from all such dangers as you fear; it is not a specially luxurious life, but neither again is it a life of penury. I work no harder than I always have worked, and for that work I am clothed and fed. Gerald, you may as

well know at once, since such knowledge is valuable to you, that I live with my father."

"You have a father, then?"

"Yes; and it has become my duty to be with him always, as long as he lives, but with that father I am determined that you shall never come into contact," and a hot flush spread itself over her face.

"His life, then, is a disgraceful one since you are ashamed of him?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried passionately, with a distressful gesture of her hands. "He is a good man, there is no disgrace; but—oh—I cannot explain to you more," and the tears flowed freely over her face. It seemed to her impossible, that she should enter into the pitiful and contemptible things that rendered her duty to that father incompatible with her love to her lover.

For how tell to such a one as Gerald Latimer, that her own father was only a vulgar, underbred person, whose manners would surely shock his fastidiousness, and

whose want of refinement would jar against his susceptibilities? If he had been a day labourer, poor Edith thought that she would have cared less, but the very thought of Monsieur l'Agneau, with his sham French accent, his dyed and waxed-up moustaches, his artificially contrived figure, expanding roundly at the chest, and buttoned up tightly at the waist in his glossy frock-coat, with the wide turned-down paper-collar, and the too emerald green pin, and the suspiciously brassy signet ring upon his fat and not always scrupulously clean little finger, filled her with a shuddering horror. It was all so small and so mean by the side of Gerald's strong, manly love, and yet it was so utterly unalterable, and the barriers that these things built up between herself and happiness were so absolutely insurmountable.

For Edith knew that it was her duty to remain with her father. She had found him so aged and broken, so sadly unequal to his daily occupation, with the gradual decrease of which he was so little able to

cope, that there appeared to her to be no other course open to her than to remain with him, to share his difficulties and to contribute with her own labour to his support.

She had, indeed, her dreams, should she be able to increase her own work, of taking him away from Laburnam Road, to some humble home of her own, where she might have things a little more in accordance with her own ideas of life. But to that home Gerald could never be admitted as her lover. She could not marry and leave her father alone with failing health and no means of self-support, neither could she bring her father with her amongst her husband's family. Her sense of filial duty forbade her to do the one—her pride forbade her to do the other. There seemed to her to be nothing left to her, but to forego the sweet dreams of love and happiness which Gerald Latimer's affection had brought to her. Nothing but to let him go away out of her life for ever!

But Edith, with all her strong will and her determination of purpose, did not take into account one thing. Gerald's will was as firm as her own, his purposes as unbending and his persistency far more dogged.

When she said to him at parting that night, tearfully and brokenly :

"Believe me, no good can come of our meeting—wish me good-bye, and God bless you, and try to understand that our farewell, unless we meet by accident, must be a final one," Gerald only said in answer, as he gripped her hand in a grasp that almost hurt her :

"Good night, but not good-bye ; between you and me 'good-bye' will never be spoken for the last time, because, as long as you and I are both alive I will never give you up, and nothing, save death, can be strong enough to part us."

And his words rang in her ears as she walked swiftly home through the darkness with a strength and a vitality that almost seemed to her to amount to a prophecy.

Chapter the Thirteenth.

EVE'S PLUCK.

"To bear, is to conquer our fate."

CAMPBELL.





CHAPTER XIII.

EVE'S PLUCK.

"To bear, is to conquer our fate."

CAMPBELL.

EVE and little Tom were keeping house together at Misrule. Gerald and Charlie were up in town. Little Tom, too, had been asked to that dinner at the Windham, whereby Dick had thought to get his night in town, entertain a choice selection of his friends, pay his respects to his lady-love in the morning and thus escape, without getting into trouble, from the hated ordeal of a heavy dinner and a dull evening at Lord Harlowe's house. Gerald and Charlie went up to London to dine with him, but little Tom, knowing what he did know, would rather have died than have accepted Dick's hospitality.

The brother and sister spent the evening together at home in a truly characteristic

fashion. They sat in the smoking-room ; Tom smoked a pipe, and Eve gave some finishing snips and touches to the tufts of black wool on Balzac's back and hinder quarters. All the fox-terriers—father, mother and puppies—kept them company before the fire, and when Balzac's toilet was completed, Eve proceeded with the further education of that long suffering animal by instructing him in the art of dancing an Irish jig on his hind legs to the tune of sundry wild breakdowns, with which Tom accompanied the proceedings upon the banjo. Balzac had an obstinate fit upon him, and Eve's patience was tried to the uttermost. He would lapse upon his four legs, instead of remaining like a well-intentioned poodle upon two, and each time that Eve coaxed him again into the perpendicular he accompanied the action with a protesting growl of annoyance, licking at his moustached upper lip, and glaring at his mistress in a truly ferocious fashion. Perchance, being a proud-minded dog, he resented the publicity of the exhibition, and was acutely sensitive to the pain of being thus

humbled in the eyes of an audience of such inferior creatures as the family of fox-terriers. It was no doubt galling to Balzac's feelings as a scion of an ancient and dignified race to be dancing lamely, with his fore paws in the air, whilst those vulgar and impudent *gamins* of puppies were making raids at his wobbling tail from behind, and Viper and Vixen were barking themselves hoarse with delight and satisfaction in front of him. All these matters, however, which were bitter as death to Balzac, were very good sport to Eve and little Tom, and no one would have imagined, from the shouts of laughter that accompanied the proceedings in the smoking-room, that Eve had ever known a trouble or a care in her life.

“It would be splendid, Tom, if we can get him to dance well before the steeplechases come off; you could black your face, and I would get you a striped red and white shirt and a collar with high gills, like Mr. Gladstone's; nobody would ever know you! You might take a hat round and get no end of money,

and we could give it to the Truxworth Hospital, if only we can work up Bal properly! You know we shall have to give him lessons every day from now to then. Bad dog! get up again—oh, those wretched pups, they do distract his attention—how dare you growl at me, sir! Oh, Tom, *do* keep to the same tune, it puts him out every time you change it—one, two, one, two—good dog—that's capital!" And so the lesson went on amongst much noise and laughter, and little Tom, at his heart, marvelled at Eve, for he knew that she suffered. Never was the faintest word spoken between them on the subject—never had Dick Gaskell's name been mentioned—and yet Tom knew that she thought of him still. In the mornings she came down often with a haggard, sleepless look, with black circles round her eyes, and heavy eye-lids that told of tears; but no sooner did she enter the breakfast-room than she would brighten up her face with smiles, forcing herself to laugh and to joke in a manner that was almost painful to Tom, who guessed at what a cost

the daily comedy of this seeming light-heartedness was played out.

And yet it must not be supposed that Eve's plight was by any means hopeless. So brave a struggle is never waged without bringing its own reward. It is true that she had lost a great deal of faith and belief in happiness, and a great many new-born hopes that had been stricken down, whilst, as yet, she had scarcely realized their existence; but, notwithstanding all that poets and novelists have written upon the subject, there is no despair in the condition of a woman who has health and youth and good looks, and a happy home-life, all on her side, even though she be forced to give up the ideal lover of her heart, if only she be brave enough to fight for herself, and to face her trouble with pluck and determination. And Eve did so fight, and did so win her battle. She did not think that she desired to pine away and perish by reason of her hopeless love, nor had she any unhealthy inclination to lay down her life because that life was apparently not destined to be exactly

as she would have liked it to be. On the contrary, she told herself that life was very sweet still, and that she was certainly lucky in that she had learnt the truth so soon, instead of being allowed to go on longer in a fool's paradise that would have been all the harder to give up; and it seemed to her that when Dick was married, and "it was all over," then she would be herself again. Sometimes, indeed, there were memories of words and looks of Dick's that came back to her with a frightful distinctness, causing her a perfect paroxysm of anguish and sweeping away in one moment whole mountains of the brave resolves that it cost her so much daily toil to build up. Sometimes, too, she could not sleep nor rest at night, and her pillow would be wet in the morning from the oceans of miserable tears with which, in the long hours of sleeplessness, she had bedewed it — for every battle with self is noted more for our frequent repulses and back-slidings than for the tardy victory which it is so hard to purchase—but, yet, in spite, or perhaps, even by

very reason of these disheartening relapses Eve still continued to gain ground, so that her natural good spirits began to reassert themselves, and the endeavour to seem gay and happy became daily less and less of an effort.

The next day, Gerald and Charlie being still away, Eve and little Tom went out hunting together. The hounds met about a mile off, at a small open common that lay in a triangle between three roads. The country was in bad order, owing to the recent break-up of the long frost, but it was a fine scenting day and the small field that assembled were all in good spirits. Colonel Slowcombe was acting master in Fred Harlowe's absence, and the hounds threw off almost immediately. Eve was in a good place at the start, and kept well up to the front. She was riding Caprice, who was on her best behaviour to-day, and who, after a slight tussle at the first fence, gave her mistress no further trouble.

"She's faster than dear old Sunbeam after all," said Eve to little Tom when she found

him beside her at the first check. "I think I shall enter her for our steeplechases. She'd stand a good chance, and you shall ride her, Tom."

"I doubt if I can. I haven't got your hands, Eve. You'd better let Gerald ride Caprice. I should do better for you on Sunbeam."

"I think I might enter Sunbeam, too, for the last race."

"And I ride them both? What next am I to do for you, Miss Latimer? Gentleman jock to your gees, and Christy minstrel dog-dancer to your poodle. Anything else? I shall have my hands full, that's evident. By Jove, listen! they've found again. This way, Eve, we can cut across by that gap," and off went little Tom, helter-skelter, Caprice bounding forward after him like an antelope.

Eve was all the better for that day's hunting—it brought back the colour to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes in a wonderful manner. As she trotted homewards in the twilight by herself—little Tom having some-

how missed her—she hummed a verse from her favourite hunting song aloud to herself:

“There is only one cure
For all maladies sure.”

She sang merrily, and for the first time she found herself thinking, not about Dick Gaskell and her unlucky love for him, but about the “Mepham Park Steeplechases,” as they were already called, and about the chances of her two hunters.

“I wonder why Tom would rather not ride Caprice?” she thought; “and yet I suppose he is right; perhaps Gerald had better ride her.” For a sense of justice forced Eve to own that, although Tom was in many ways the best horseman of her three brothers, having the prettiest seat, the firmest nerve, and the finest eye for a country of any of them, still, in the matter of “hands,” Gerald, who was neither so keen a sportsman nor so graceful a rider, had incomparably the best of it.

She was just pondering abstractedly upon

this all-important topic, going along the muddy road at a gentle jog-trot pace, when she became aware that a vehicle was coming up quickly behind her. She drew up to one side, and a fly, laden with luggage, passed her rapidly. There was nothing surprising in this, because it was the high-road from Truxworth, and that anybody coming from the station in this direction would be bound to drive along it; but what did surprise Eve somewhat was, that when she looked idly towards it as it passed her, she was sure, although it was now getting dark, that she saw the face of the master of the Meadowshire Foxhounds looking out of the window, and, furthermore, when about to nod pleasantly to him, the face drew back very hurriedly into the shadow of the fly, and so was suddenly hidden from her.

Now this set Eve wondering for more reasons than one. To begin with, Mr. Fred Harlowe was believed to be out of health and to be away until the following week, and if he were better and had come home why

should he be in a hired fly and not in his own phaeton, which would naturally have gone to the station to meet him? And, why, again, should he draw back his head so very sharply when he saw Eve as if he did not wish to be seen? This, indeed, appeared to Eve to be so very extraordinary an action that she came at last to the conclusion that it could not be Mr. Harlowe at all, but that a chance likeness, which the dimness of the twilight hour had fostered, had caused her to mistake some stranger for the absent M.F.H. After all, she reflected, the fly had driven very quickly by, and it was only a flash of an indistinct face behind the glass of the window which she had seen.

About a mile further on the road there stood by the wayside a small inn, which, being kept by an ex-butler, who had married his master's cook, bore an excellent reputation as to cleanliness, good food, and good attendance. At this hostelry, which was called the "Crown Hotel," hunting men from other

parts of the world were often in the habit of putting up, and bedrooms for extra bachelors were frequently taken there by the people in the neighbourhood at such times as balls and races, or when festivities of any kind caused people to overfill their own houses. When Eve got near to the "Crown Hotel," which a turn in the road suddenly revealed to her, she was instantly aware that the fly which had passed her was stopping in front of it, and a faint curiosity caused her to hasten her pace in order to see who it could be who was so unaccountably like Mr. Harlowe. The fly-door was open, and when she was near enough to it she saw a man, who had apparently been into the house to confer with the landlady, come rapidly out of it again.

"It's all right, you can have a room here," she heard him say to somebody inside. And if Eve had deemed herself mistaken in the matter of Fred Harlowe's face, she had, at all events, no sort of doubt whatever as to his voice, and to the tall angular figure with

its long legs that strode with wide paces out of the inn door. It was the M.F.H. sure enough!

By this time Eve was so devoured by the sin of her great ancestress and namesake, that she could no longer resist taking Caprice by the house at the very slowest walk of which that quicksilver-like animal was capable, and great was her surprise when she saw Mr. Harlowe help a lady out of the dark recesses of the vehicle—a lady, too, of such extraordinary appearance, that Eve did not recollect having ever seen so remarkable a person before. A bonnet, crowned with a high bush of flowers and feathers, adorned her head, from beneath which, straight, pale yellow hair straggled wildly and untidily out upon her forehead. The rest of her costume was gaudy and vulgar—her dress, jacket, and gloves being all of different and very brilliant colours. She got quickly out of the fly, and went into the house, followed by Mr. Harlowe, who was so much engrossed in attending to her that he never remarked

the solitary horsewoman riding by in the gathering darkness, which was, perhaps, less wonderful, because Eve had been cunning enough to take Caprice on to the soft strip of grass on the other side of the road so that the sound of her hoofs might be judiciously muffled as she went by.

When she had gone a little further, Eve could not resist the temptation of looking back, and she saw that the box from the top of the fly was being borne into the "Crown Hotel." And then Mr. Harlowe got into it, and the driver whipped up his horse again.

And so did Eve, for not wishing to be seen by him, she put Caprice into a canter, and was soon beyond the chance of being again passed by the lumbering vehicle in which, apparently, Mr. Harlowe was making for his own house, after having deposited that extraordinary female at the little wayside inn.

Who was she, Eve wondered. Not a lady, certainly. In fact, the bare recollection of

the extraordinary figure in the gaudy garments made her laugh aloud to herself. But then, what on earth had Fred Harlowe to do with her? Could she be merely a chance fellow-traveller whom he had philanthropically befriended? It was extremely unlike him to do such a thing. And then, what again could bring such a woman to stay at the "Crown Hotel" in February? She could not be a relation of the landlord's, for then she would have been an expected guest, which, evidently, from Mr. Harlowe's remark, she was not. Who, and what, then, was she?

But as Eve was unable to answer any one of these questions she was obliged to leave the mystery unsolved, and presently, as she reached her own white gate, the sight of Tom hobbling in upon an animal that was—oh, horror of horrors!—absolutely *dead lame*, effectually diverted her thoughts from Mr. Harlowe and his peculiar proceedings.





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